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EL RUBIO BRAVO, King of the Swordsmen;

Or, THE TERRIBLE BROTHERS OF TABASCO.

BY COL. THOMAS HOYER MONSTERY,

CHAMPION-AT-ARMS OF THE TWO AMERICAS.

AUTHOR OF "IRON WRIST, THE SWORDMASTER," "THE DEMON DUELIST," "THE CZAR SPY," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"I MUST KILL THEM ALL, OR I'LL BE KILLED," MUTTERED EL RUBIO, AS HE SENT A MUSKET FLYING OUT OF THE HANDS OF DON DOMINGO.

El Rubio Bravo, KING OF THE SWORDSMEN;

OR,

The Terrible Brothers of Tabasco.

A Story of Tropical Love and Adventure.

BY COL. THOMAS HOYER MONSTERY,

*Champion at Arms of the Americas.*AUTHOR OF "IRON WRIST," "THE DEMON DUEL-
IST," "THE CZAR'S SPY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THREE TO ONE.

THE independent State of Honduras in Central America, lies between thirteen and sixteen degrees north of the equator, and is traversed by several volcanic chains of lofty mountains, some of them covered with snow all the year round. Consequently Honduras enjoys a great diversity of climate.

Down by the sea level, the atmosphere resembles a vapor bath most of the year, varied by furious hurricanes in the rainy season.

On the high table lands of the interior the climate is cool and temperate, with pure bracing air that intoxicates the senses like a draught of wine, and up in the snow-line no one lives but the condors, who carry thither the prey they find below.

The town of Truxillo lies on the coast, in the vapor bath region, but is cooled by the trade winds, or no one could live there. As it is, there are only a few hundred people in and around it, and the houses have a dilapidated appearance.

But, spite of the fact that there is little in Truxillo to tempt an invader, it has a fort to guard it, and the fort contains a garrison.

The fort is a ruinous structure of stone, built in the days when Morgan and his buccaneers used to raid Spanish America, and the garrison is proportioned to the monetary resources of the government which happens to possess Honduras at the time.

The time is usually short; Central America having a cheerful habit of revolutions, which occur about once a quarter.

At the time when our story opens, the President of the Republic of Honduras was a half-breed Indian named Guartiola, and he had held power for very nearly two years, without being killed.

To be sure, there was a reason for this unusual good luck, and it was not altogether owing to Guartiola's own abilities. The fact is that the people of Central America are a very different race from those who inhabit the United States, and cannot get along without plenty of fighting. They are the descendants of the old Spanish Conquistadores, or Conquerors, who were all soldiers; and they retain the tastes and habits of their ancestors.

The people of the United States come from a line of farmers and other hard-working colonists, who never fought except from necessity, and got through with it as soon as possible, with a view to the accumulation of wealth.

The Spaniards went in to conquer the empires they found established, with the idea of making the people slaves and living in idleness, and they have kept up the idea to the present day.

Consequently, while the United States has grown in riches, its people passing their time in accumulation, the Central Americans have been equally happy after their fashion, in fighting.

Failing outside enemies, they fight each other for fun; and the result is that they are fast approaching the condition of the Kilkenny Cats.

But if any President can give them an outside enemy to fight, he is a happy man until the war is over, secure from revolutions.

It was President Guartiola's luck to give his people an outside enemy in the person of "Los Yanquis."

All the factions in Honduras were as one in their hatred of "Los Yanquis" and when the enemy came in the form of the "Filibustero" Walker, the people were happy in a real war of their own and Guartiola was happiest of all.

But at last came the day when Walker, thanks to the American Government ships and marines, was taken and shot, and then Guartiola began to feel uneasy for himself. War being over, revolutions were next in order.

It was just at this time that a large steamer, full of "Yanquis," came to Truxillo, a week late for Walker's ball, and her people came ashore and took the town.

Not much trouble about that, for the garrison of the fort—called the "Castle" by compliment—consisted of Major Don Rafael Balderamos, Captain Don Domingo Senas, Corporal Jose Jesus Diaz, and one soldier, who officiated as sentry and answered to the name of Manuel.

But when the visitors heard that the filibuster Walker had been shot, and that all filibusters were to be treated in the same way, with the aid of the English and American squadrons promised to the government, they said no more

of taking Truxillo, but allowed Truxillo to take them in the most peaceful fashion.

They said they were all quiet travelers, merchants, and what not else, come to see the country, and they submitted to be examined by Don Rafael Balderamos, who allowed most of them to re-embark and go to Belize, leaving a good deal of hard American cash in the major's pocket, but very glad to get off even so as peaceable citizens.

There was only one passenger out of the Yankee steamer whom Balderamos would not pass over with a certificate. He pronounced him a suspicious character, a soldier certainly, a filibuster probably; and, anyhow, he ordered him to be closely confined to the limits of the "Castle," and killed if he attempted to escape.

The reasons for this severity in the passenger's case were two. First, the stranger had no money to bribe Balderamos; second, his baggage consisted of two huge chests labeled "ARMS."

So the steamer with the disappointed would-be filibusters sailed away, and the solitary prisoner watched them off from the summit of a ruined tower in the castle limits, and said to himself, in a mournful sort of way:

"Olaf, my boy, you were a fool to come to this dog-hole of a place, where they will kill you with as little glory as a rat in a trap. You will never see your Carmelita again."

He was a man about thirty, straight as an arrow, with a slim waist and an appearance of slightness that was very deceptive. Had you seen him stripped, you would have noticed a forty-inch chest, with lean, muscular arms and legs as hard as iron, and a wiry appearance indicative of unusual strength and activity. He stood about five feet ten, and looked taller, while his complexion and hair were remarkable among the dark, sallow men of the tropics, with their black hair and eyes.

This man was a regular white blonde such as the Spaniards call a "Rubio," with fierce blue eyes and hair so light that it looked like spun flax in the sun, for he wore it long and curly. His dress at the time he grumbled to himself about his fate consisted of a white shirt and trowsers, both the worse for the heat, and a battered old straw hat. His feet were bare, and so were his arms to the shoulders.

The garrison of the castle was lounging about, paying no attention to the prisoner. That is to say, the captain and the corporal were smoking together, and the solitary sentry was standing by the broken gate, looking out to sea.

The prisoner also looked out seaward and watched the vanishing column of smoke of the steamer till it faded away to the north-west, when he turned away with a sigh, went down to the court and approached the shady corner in which Major Balderamos had caused his baggage to be placed.

He unlocked one of the huge chests, labeled "Arms," and showed that it contained a good deal of clothing, in the shape of uniforms and handsome dresses of all kinds.

Captain Don Domingo Senas was sitting so that he could see the open chest, and his eyes glittered with cupidity; but he said nothing as the captive pulled out a box of cigars, put two or three in his pocket, and then began to smoke another.

Then he locked the chest, and paced in a gloomy manner up and down the court, smoking, and never deigning to notice the captain and the corporal, though the commissioned officer coughed thrice.

"The man is a low Yanqui without manners," observed the captain, spitefully. "He had six boxes of cigars there. I saw them. And he has not offered me—the acting commandante—so much as one."

"We can have them all in five minutes, señor," suggested the corporal, with a favor-currying smile, "if the prisoner only gets near enough to Manuel."

The captain nodded and grinned. Several guns, with bayonets on, were leaning against the corner in which they were sitting.

Meantime the prisoner was walking up and down, muttering to himself in English:

"I could lick these three like children, but I can't lick a whole nation, and they'll all be down on me. I was a fool to be led away by those fine stories about Walker. The whole country is not worth stealing."

He paused in his walk, and looked out to sea in a wistful way. He was standing by the open gate, which had only one leaf, and nothing prevented his walking out but the presence of Manuel, who was leaning on his musket, half asleep.

With a sullen puff of his cigar the prisoner resumed his stroll; and as he passed the captain and corporal, cast a scornful angry glance at them, as if they were noxious vermin.

When he came back toward the gate he walked a little out, so as to see further, when Captain Senas suddenly yelled:

"Manuel, the prisoner is escaping! Kill him! Kill the accursed Yanqui."

Immediately Manuel, who was a squat surly-looking Indian, uttered a fierce Spanish oath and made a jab at the prisoner with all his force.

The stranger evaded the thrust by an active

spring, and immediately grasped the musket shouting fiercely:

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Treason," yelled Captain Senas, jumping up and grabbing a musket.

"Help! murder," roared Corporal Diaz as he followed his chief's example, and then away they rushed for the prisoner.

The fair-haired man looked round and saw them coming, when he uttered an impatient English curse and dealt the struggling Manuel a kick in the diaphragm that doubled up that hero in a moment and made him relinquish his gun.

Then the stranger turned and met Don Domingo, who made a vicious thrust at him with his bayonet.

It was parried by "El Rubio" with a slight motion of his own bayonet that sent the other whirling round, and the next moment the *whole garrison* was fiercely stabbing and cursing at the active stranger, who had to leap from side to side to keep his enemies behind each other, while he parried their thrusts, whirled them round, knocked their muskets flying out of their hands, but never offered to thrust back.

He adopted the easiest of attitudes, with his musket butt on his right hip, where it rested immovable, and always parried with a slight motion of the bayonet, which sent the opposing bayonet far out of the line with apparent ease.

He volted from right to left, disarmed all his opponents successively, but inasmuch as he never offered to kill one of them, though he could have done it over and over again, they returned to the attack.

And three to one, with the thermometer at a hundred in the shade makes it pretty hard work on the toughest single man. The fair-haired stranger got red in the face, then pale; the sweat was pouring off him, and he muttered desperately:

"I must kill them all, or I'll be killed."

He leaped back for the last time, with a shout in Spanish of "Go away, I tell you," when he happened to cast his eyes to the gate, in the hope of running out, and there beheld a tall dark man with a huge mustache, who stood with his arms folded, critically watching the whole scene.

It was Don Rafael Balderamos, the supreme commander of the noble garrison.

The persecuted stranger gave a last parry which sent Don Domingo's musket flying for the fifth time, out of his hands and rushed over to Balderamos, crying:

"Señor Mayor, salva me, por l'amor de Dios!"

[Mr. Major, save me for the love of God.]

Balderamos threw up his hands with a cry of intense surprise, as he saw his captain disarmed, and exclaimed:

"Jesu Maria, se pued'un hombr' aprender eso?"

[Jesu Maria, can a man learn that?]

The stranger wheeled round and flung his musket full in the face of Corporal Diaz, flooring that worthy before he answered. Then he went up to Balderamos, ran his arm through that of the Spaniard and replied coolly:

"Certainly, señor, it is my business to teach it. I am a master of the sword."

The garrison had stopped to wipe its face—for only Manuel was left armed—and Balderamos, with an expression of the most reverential admiration, answered:

"Señor, you are a king of all weapons, and we thought you were a common Yanqui filibuster. This is amazing. What is your honorable name?"

The stranger smiled.

"If you will come to my arms-chest, I will show you."

Balderamos followed him in silence, the discomfited garrison wiping its face and staring, and the prisoner opened the chest, disclosing, besides the handsome dresses, a number of swords, foils, breastplates, and the other apparatus of a fencing-master.

From the corner of the box he produced a couple of large parchments, which he opened and spread out.

"Behold, señor," he said, "first my patent as colonel, swordmaster-general, to the Emperor of Russia. I held that post till I resigned it. Here is my commission as Colonel Instructor-at-Arms to the army of his Majesty of Spain, and here that of Instructor-General in Cuba. I resigned in consequence of yellow fever, and came here because I heard that your people in Honduras are fond of the exercises of arms. I came in search of my fortune, and my name is Olaf Svenson, at your service, and your prisoner."

"Prisoner no more; my guest, my friend, my hero!" cried Balderamos, enthusiastically. "Señor Don Olavo Sovensone, I am proud to have the honor of knowing him of whom I have often heard, El Rubio Bravo. The President shall hear of you; you shall be invited to Comayagua; you shall be anything you like in Honduras. We adore arms, we adore you!"

And Don Rafael fairly hugged his late prisoner, while Captain Senas and his garrison waved their hats and roared:

"El Rubio Bravo forever!"

Such it is to be among people who fight for the love of fighting. El Rubio Bravo was changed from a prisoner to the hero of Truxillo, and a courier was sent off post-haste to Guartiola to tell him that the king of all swordsmen was in Honduras.

The whole town went mad over him as soon as they heard that he was a famous fighter, and he was at once escorted out of the castle by the whole garrison, with drums beating—Manuel did that—colors flying—Captain Senas carried it—and trumpets sounding—Don Rafael Balderamos did the blowing—till he was safely installed in the private mansion of Balderamos himself.

CHAPTER II.

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE.

A FEW days after the fight in the castle, Balderamos came to his new friend in a great state of excitement.

"It is all arranged, my hero. President Guartiola bids me offer you the post of Instructor-General of Arms to the forces of the State of Honduras, with the rank of colonel. Your fortune is made."

Olaf did not seem to be very much impressed by the news. In fact, since his release from the castle he had been, if possible, a little more restless and uneasy than before.

"What will the pay be?" he asked, with a yawn.

"The pay, my dear friend? Anything you want; *anything*. We adore you."

Olaf yawned again as he answered:

"I don't want much; only the same as I got in Cuba. The glory is not much here."

Balderamos coughed as he asked, timidly:

"And how much did you get in Cuba, colonel?"

"Two hundred dollars in gold a month and three rations, with forage," answered Olaf.

The major's eyes opened wide as he ejaculated:

"Eh, Santo Dios! Two hundred in gold a month. Why, the whole State of Honduras could not pay such a salary. Be moderate, my friend. The prime minister only receives fifty dollars a month, and President Guarteola twice that sum."

Olaf yawned worse than ever, as he retorted:

"So much the worse for Honduras. I shall not take service here. By the by, have you in your very rich State such a place as Tegucigalpa?"

"Tegucigalpa? Certainly. The President is there now."

Olaf looked more interested, and he pursued:

"Are there any Spanish merchants there? I mean real Spaniards of the old blood."

Balderamos thought a moment ere he replied:

"Only one, and he came very recently from Spain with his daughter."

Olaf looked decidedly interested now.

"A daughter! What is his name, if you remember?"

"His name—let me see—oh, yes. Don Carlos—Carlos Ximenes."

Olaf laid his hand on the other's arm.

"You are sure he is in Tegucigalpa, and the daughter, too? What is he doing there?"

"He is a trader in indigo, and makes a good deal of money, they say, by controlling all the crops of the State. President Guartiola treats him with great favor, and they do say that—"

The major hesitated.

"What?" asked Olaf, with a singular glitter of his eyes.

"Well, they do say that the señorita plays her cards for her father, and treats Guartiola like a fish on a hook, with smiles and—Why, what is the matter?"

He started back at the sight of the other's face, which was working with a passion, the intensity of which fairly appalled Balderamos.

The dark men of the South are quick to anger, but their rage is not deep, and their lack of self-control deprives it of dignity; but when the cold, reserved blonde of the North shows his anger in his face, it is apt to be very fierce and dangerous.

Olaf's eyes were glaring at Balderamos, the red veins in the corners standing prominently out, the face pale as ashes, and the strong jaw muscles standing out like bunches, showing the firmness with which the teeth were clenched.

"What is the matter, señor?" faltered Balderamos.

Olaf's face instantly resumed its usual iron calm.

"It is nothing. I had a twinge of pain from an old wound. Go on, please. You say that President Guartiola makes the Señorita Ximenes his favorite in public, shows favor to her father—"

"Yes, yes. He gives all sorts of monopolies to the old man, and the daughter leads all the public balls, and sits in Guartiola's box at all bull-fights. Of course this is not all done for nothing, señor."

Olaf turned away his head and lighted a cigar with his usual coolness, but Balderamos noticed that he bit off nearly half the cigar with a snap, and that he smoked with a furious energy that betokened a disturbance of some sort in his mind.

And the major, not being deficient in pene-

tration, at once divined that there was a lady in the case somewhere, in other words that El Rubio Bravo had at some time been acquainted with Señorita Ximenes.

He hesitated, stammered, and finally asked:

"Is the lady a friend, señor?"

"No!" was the blunt response.

Balderamos coughed.

"Indeed. I thought—"

"Think nothing. I wish I had never come to this accursed country."

Olaf was evidently in a very bad humor.

"But, señor, if you choose to accept the President's very liberal offer, your fortune is made."

"I don't want such a beggarly fortune."

The major coughed again.

"It might be prudent to accept it, colonel."

The other started angrily.

"Why, why?"

"Simply because, if you do not go, I have orders to arrest you on the spot, if it takes all the people in Truxillo."

Olaf stared angrily at him for a moment, and then gave a peculiar scornful laugh.

"Balderamos, you are a fool; so is Guartiola. I will go. I was only joking. But some of your fighting men will wish I had not come before I go. I have no money with me, but I have in my chests nearly five thousand dollars' worth of arms, clothes, jewels, and so on. Have you a money-lender in town? If so send him to me so I can go to Tegucigalpa as becomes a swordmaster."

Balderamos smiled as affably as ever, as he said:

"Certainly. There is an Italian Jew called Baroni who will accommodate you at once."

"Can I get a decent horse here?" pursued Olaf. "It is true I am a Dane and was bred a sailor, but I can ride a horse too, and I like a good one."

Balderamos rubbed his hands and chuckled.

"You shall have a wonder, for a hundred dollars, a regular angel of a horse, who can trot and amble and waltz and stop at full gallop inside our castle flag."

"Be it so."

And the Dane threw away his cigar and lit another, when he fell into a brown study, from which Balderamos did not venture to disturb him, so the major went away to find the Jew money-lender.

Left thus alone, Olaf began to mutter to himself.

"What a fool am I to come here in pursuit of a coquette. I might have known she would not live like a nun for my sake, and there is the father, who hates me, against me too. But if it be true as this infernal Greaser hints that Guartiola— Bah! it is a fable. She can play with these fools of the South and wind them round her finger—but if—if—"

He ground his teeth so that they could be heard in the next room and growled out: "Let them all look to themselves. When my race strikes, it slugs hard and is remembered. Carmelita Ximenes, if you play me false, so much the worse for you and yours."

He went out into the town to cool off his excitement and strolled down to the beach. A few naked Caribs were fishing from their canoes outside the breakers. He beckoned in one of them, and went out into deep water, where he amused himself by tossing his last silver coins overboard and watching the little Indians dive after them and catch them before they vanished.

He was roused from his abstraction by the voice of Balderamos, hailing him from the shore.

"Senor Coronel, news, news. Come in."

The fact was that Balderamos feared El Rubio was trying to escape, and wanted to have him safe in.

Olaf came in, and was saluted with cordiality.

"Baroni will lend you all you want, and you can be on the road to-morrow morning. But I have more news than that. Pepe Gomez is at Tegucigalpa and has heard of your arrival."

"And who the deuce is Pepe Gomez?"

Balderamos stared as if he hardly believed his ears.

"What! have you never heard of the Gomez brothers, the Terrible Seven of Tabasco?"

Olaf yawned.

"Never, on my honor."

"Oh, Jesu Maria! what a thing is fame? Why, they are seven Mexicans, brothers, from the State of Tabasco, and the most famous of all the *espachadins* in Spanish America."

Olaf looked more interested.

"*Espachadins*—you mean swordsmen?"

"Of course. They have killed—some say as many as two hundred people."

"Oh, come, nonsense. Take off half."

"Not a man, señor. You see they have very wonderful advantages."

"Indeed? What are they?"

"Well, you see, in the first place, they are all powerful men, strong and supple."

"Granted. So are other men. But two hundred—"

"You forget there are seven of them."

"Well, what of that?"

"Simply this, that no man can fight seven."

"Of course not all at once; but singly, why not?"

"There it is, señor. Any man who touches one of this seven touches all of them. If he wounds one, he has to fight all the rest."

"And if he kills one?"

"That is impossible. At least I have never heard of its being done."

"Plainly, or they would be no longer seven. But go on. This Pepe, where are his brothers?"

"In Tabasco. Pepe is the oldest, and has come out to coax a few duels out of our people. The others stay home, and if Pepe comes back all right, with plenty of money, well and good. Another goes out."

"Plenty of money? How does he get it?"

Balderamos shrugged his shoulders.

"By betting. He will wager a thousand dollars of our money—that is about two hundred of your Yanqui dollars—that he will disable the best man in a town. If he wins, well and good."

"I see: he is a prize-fighter."

"Yes, señor, with a sword. But if he gets hurt, and comes back without money and with wounds, then the other six vow the death of the man who has hurt him, and they all go out in a body to kill him."

Olaf looked thoughtful.

"So your brothers are assassins."

"Yes, señor."

"Very well, Balderamos. I see a way to beat them. This Pepe must not be allowed to go home. That's all."

"How prevent it, señor?"

"Simply by killing Pepe. It's a hard thing to do, and one I've never done in my life; but self-preservation before all, my friend."

Balderamos smiled.

"Oh, if you can only beat the Terrible Seven, you will be a hero, and all the people will worship you."

The Dane smiled slightly.

"They are after all only the heroes of a little province. I have beaten the best men in Europe. Come. Let us go."

They strolled along toward Baroni's, and next day at dawn, Colonel Olaf Svenson, El Rubio Bravo, was riding on his way to Tegucigalpa on a splendid horse, dressed in all the bravery of a Spanish-American cavalier.

CHAPTER III.

THE ESPADACHINS.

THE great square of Tegucigalpa was full of people in the cool of the afternoon, when the shadow of Mount Matador covered the city and everything was pleasant.

In the midst of the crowd an open space had been cleared beside a platform, and on the platform were seated President Guartiola with all his ministers, and a little group of ladies in the picturesque costumes known as the "saya y manto," a short skirt, and a coquettish veil of black lace.

Beside Guartiola sat a particularly beautiful lady of slender, graceful figure; whose large dark eyes, oval face and pure profile showed her to be of a different race from the flat-faced "Greaser" around. This lady had the smallest feet in the neatest satin slippers ever seen, and she flirted her large fan with a languid and haughty grace that was inexpressibly provoking.

Guartiola, a fat, sensual-looking man, with a cruel mouth, seemed to think so, for he was evidently infatuated with the lady and constantly appealed to her decision on all sorts of points.

Below, in the open space, was a group of bronzed, powerfully built men, who all carried huge swords, and were dressed in a glittering costume, much resembling that worn by bull-fighters.

In the midst of these was one man whose frame was heavier than that of his fellows, and whose face wore an expression of brutal triumph as he said:

"You've no *espachadins* in this town. They are all babies. See, here are a thousand good dollars in this bag, and I'll claim no stakes if I don't disable my man."

He jingled a leathern bag of silver as he spoke, and the other *espachadins* looked at each other as if they would like to take him up, but dared not.

At last one said in a surly way:

"We haven't got that much money; but for the honor of Tegucigalpa, I'll go a hundred."

"Agreed!" cried the other eagerly. "Pepe Gomez is well satisfied to make a hundred when thousands are scarce. Out with the money."

The *espachadin*, rather slowly and with a sullen face, took out his little bag of money and laid it at the feet of President Guartiola, who smiled and said:

"Fight hard for the glory of Tegucigalpa, Martino."

As for Martino, the work before him was too serious for smiling, so he only bowed and stripped off his gay jacket, while Pepe Gomez counted out his money before the President, and then cried out:

"Now, señors and señoras, you shall see Pepe Gomez slash this fellow up to pieces in five minutes."

He grasped his long sword and took his place with the confident brutal glee of an old prize-fighter who sees in his opponent a novice, and was just about to begin the duel when a stir and shouting rose in the crowd outside, which presently resolved themselves into:

"El Rubio Bravo! El Rey Espada! Viva! viva!"

Pepe Gomez listened and Martino with him; and as they did so the lady beside Guartiola whispered to him something which made him say:

"Certainly, señorita, with much pleasure."

Then he called out to the espadachins:

"Senores, we will postpone this battle, for here, if I mistake not, comes the king of you all, El Rubio Bravo."

There was an immediate chorus of gabble below, in the midst of which a horseman in velvet and gold lace, with long fair curls flowing down over his shoulders from under a broad hat, rode through the crowd and bowed to the President, calling out:

"I am charmed to behold your excellency at last. I am Colonel Olaf Svenson."

"El Rey Espada, the king of swordsmen," cried Guartiola enthusiastically. "You are but just in time, colonel, to give a boasting Mexican a lesson—or take one."

He added the last words under his breath, and Olaf smiled and bowed as he replied:

"Nothing like commencing business early, your excellency; where is the gentleman with whom I am to fight?"

"Here he stands," cried Gomez, slapping his broad chest and speaking in a deep bass voice. "Head of the Terrible Seven of Tabasco, of whom you have heard, and able to kill any *maldito Gringo* like you for a thousand dollars. Aha!"

Olaf turned to him as he sat on his horse and surveyed him critically.

"You seem to be a pretty good man, and I have but just ridden in from a long journey. Can you let it go till to-morrow at the same hour?"

"Now, now," growled Gomez. "Aha! the Gringo is afraid of my sword, I see."

Olaf smiled and looked round up at the platform, where his eyes met those of the beautiful lady, who slowly waved her fan to and fro, but gave no sign of the least recognition.

His face changed on the instant and a frown crossed it as he looked. The frown was there again as he swung off his horse, went up to Gomez and said to him in a stern voice:

"You lie!"

With the word, standing close to the other, he let fly his right hand, coming up from the hip with the force of a pile-driver, catching the boasting espadachin on the left cheek under the eye, with a crack that echoed over the square, and cutting a deep gash.

Under that blow, so unexpected from a man of his slender appearance, Gomez tottered a moment and sunk down with a stupid smile on his face, while Olaf, in the midst of a deep silence, said:

"When I meet brave gentlemen, I use the sword. To ruffians like that I take the weapons of nature alone. They are quite enough for my purpose."

A thrill of amazement and terror went through the crowd; for it is a curious trait of Spanish-Americans that while they will face steel they are mortally afraid of revolvers or the fist of a boxer.

Even Guartiola turned pale, but the lady by his side smiled as one well pleased, and said in a clear voice:

"Well done, Rubio. I told your excellency he was no child to be cowed by Gomez."

But Pepe Gomez, though completely stunned for a few moments by the well delivered "brain blow" of Olaf, was too tough a subject to be settled for good. He rose up with a growl and reached for his sword, which had escaped from his hands as he fell.

"We will see," he hissed, "if you are as good with the sword as your hands. Cover my money or back out."

Olaf took out a little bag of gold.

"Here are five hundred of your dollars, one hundred of ours. It's all I have. Who will back me for the rest?"

The beautiful lady spoke out:

"I will. Lend me the money, Guartiola."

Guartiola was all willingness, and El Rubio allowed a smile to cross his face as he said:

"La señorita is very good. I will win the money for her."

A moment later he had thrown aside his gaudy velvet jacket, and had drawn from where it hung at his saddle-bow a long slender Toledo blade with a basket hilt.

"Clear the road," he cried. "Now let us see what the Terrible Seven are made of."

The circle was cleared like magic and the antagonists stood facing each other, about twelve feet apart, when Gomez executed a spring like a tiger and delivered a furious cut at Olaf's head.

It never fell, however, for as soon as the Dane's sword rose, as it did like a flash to parry the blow, the espadachin drew off before the blades touched, and made another grand leap

past Olaf to the left, when he thrust at him savagely.

With the slightest movement of the sword-arm Olaf wheeled on his heel, and stood with his sword pointed straight at Gomez's eyes, and again the espadachin was foiled.

In this singular fashion three good minutes passed, Gomez leaping from side to side, constantly threatening, but never allowing the sharp blades to cross, while the Danish master kept wheeling on his right heel, constantly facing his foe, his sword always pointed at the other's face.

This sort of work soon tired out even the powerful and active Gomez, who stopped, panting for breath.

The moment he stopped Olaf advanced, one step at a time, but straight and rapid as a dart, and though Gomez fell back he could not keep the swords from clashing in parrying a straight lunge.

"I have you now!" cried the Dane with a fierce laugh that blended with the clash.

With the word he plied the other with thrusts he could no longer evade, drove him all round the ring, and at last sent a straight lunge into his body below the right shoulder, under which the boastful espadachin uttered a howl of pain and dropped his sword as he fell.

Olaf calmly wiped his own sword and said:

"If the other six are no better than you, I pity their chances, my friend. Good-night."

He turned away, resumed his jacket, and bowed low to Guartiola.

"Your excellency is satisfied, I hope, and I have won the stakes fairly."

Guartiola raised his hands in wonder.

"You are the king of the sword in truth. Such fencing never was seen. Now you will come to my palace, and you shall be treated in royal style."

He kept his word, for that very evening the palace—a two story house of adobes with clay floors below—was lighted up from top to bottom; and El Rubio Bravo was treated to a truly royal Honduras banquet, in which Guartiola exhibited his taste for imported luxury, by bringing out some English plum pudding in tin cans, together with three dozen bottles of Bass's pale ale.

But if the banquet was ludicrous in its bad taste, the ball was a success, on the green grass under a grove of palm trees, hung with colored lanterns; and here at last the famous swordman received as a distinguished honor from Guartiola an introduction to Senorita Carmelita Ximenes, who amazed and astounded her presidential admirer to the verge of an apoplectic stroke by saying calmly:

"Colonel Svenson and I need no introduction, señor. We have known each other for three years."

Then she took his arm and strolled off under the palms, while Guartiola grew green with jealousy, muttering:

"Old acquaintances! And so she has fooled me after all. Well, we shall see."

As the Dane strolled away with his beautiful partner he remained quite silent, with a strange expression of anger and reserve on his face, till she burst out laughing.

"Why, Don Olavo, one would think you had seen a ghost instead of me. Why don't you ask where is my father?"

"Because, señorita," he said, gravely, "I would rather see you with him, though he hates me, than alone in the court of this vulgar Guartiola. Senor Ximenes is a gentleman."

She smiled at him coquettishly, as she said:

"You men of the North have no feeling. One would think you would enjoy your good luck to be alone with me after we have been parted a year. My father went to Comayagua last week, and we expect him back to-morrow. Then farewell to moonlight music, love, and all that is sweet. To-night let us enjoy ourselves."

"And Guartiola," he said, hesitatingly, for he couldn't not resist those eyes and tones.

"Guartiola is an ox, and I lead him by a ring in his nose," she answered saucily. "I would not give my Rubio Bravo for a hundred such things."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COCK-FIGHT.

The town of Tegucigalpa was all excitement next evening, for there was to be a famous cock-fight in the Plaza de Armas.

Spanish-Americans are devoted to cock-fights, bull-fights, man-fights and every other kind of contest, while they are equally fond of betting on their favorites, and in this instance all the population were enlisted on one side or the other.

The Gran Matador of Comayagua, who had vanquished all opponents for nearly three years, was going to fight a Mexican bird from the province of Tabasco, who went by the name of El Imperador—the Emperor.

Of course public opinion in Tegucigalpa was on the side of the Honduras bird, on account, not so much of his prowess as of his being a specimen of home talent.

The other bird was backed by a few Mexican merchants in town.

The President and all his cabinet were of course at the cock-fight, and there was no lack

of ladies, who were as ready to bet as the men, though a little risky as to the payment of losses.

Conspicuous among the President's suite could be seen El Rubio Bravo, in a sort of uniform invented by himself which set off his handsome figure well. Since his arrival, the Senorita Ximenes had not been seen near the President, and rumor at Tegucigalpa said that she and El Rubio Bravo were old lovers, who had been parted by a cruel father, and that now it was all right again between them, at least till Senor Ximenes came back from his trip to the Indigo planters.

He did come back on the evening of the great cock-fight, and was seen to greet El Rubio Bravo with a cold civility that confirmed the story, after which he and Guartiola sat side by side, muttering under their breath to each other, while Carmelita and Olaf made love in the most open way right under the President's nose.

But now the birds were brought out and placed in the ring singly, for the people to admire, when the betting began.

El Matador—the killer—was a very handsome black and red cock, who crowed loudly as soon as he got his feet, while El Imperador was still in his handler's arms. The people cheered him and voices shouted all sorts of bets on his victory.

President Guartiola turned round with a sort of vailed sneer to Olaf.

"You don't know much about this in your country, colonel."

Olaf bowed as he answered:

"No, señor. Our people prohibit it by law and I used to think it a stupid brutal sport, till I went to Havana and learned the points. It is a contest of skill and strength, and I call myself a judge now."

Guartiola sneered again.

"Ah, indeed? Perhaps you'll bet against El Matador then?"

"Not yet, your excellency."

"Why not?"

"I have not seen the other bird yet."

Guartiola nodded and whispered to Carmelita's father, a stout white-headed gentleman;

"He is cautious, but we'll clean him out yet."

Ximenes whispered back:

"You shall have all the money you need, if you will get rid of him. He has bewitched the girl with his ways, and she scorns reason."

Just then El Matador's handler took him up and a squat Mexican in velvet and gold threw El Imperador down into the ring, shouting out:

"Make your bets, señores. Here stands El Imperador to back them."

A roar of disdainful laughter was heard from the throats of the people and a babel of voices broke out with bets against the bird. El Imperador was a simple black cock apparently without a strain of game blood in him, who stood in the pit and began picking at the dirt without so much as a crow.

But he was stoutly built and several pounds heavier than El Matador.

"Well Don Olavo, do you see any chance to make money?" sneered Guartiola.

"I do," replied the Dane quietly.

The creole was up in a moment.

"What is it? Name your bet."

"I await your excellency's."

"Very well then, a thousand on El Matador."

"I'll take it, señor and make it eight if you like," replied the Dane. "El Imperador is going to win this fight."

Guartiola put up a bag of silver.

"There's my money. Senor Ximenes shall hold it. Where is yours?"

He knew that the Dane had only his winnings of the previous night.

What was his surprise when Olaf showed him a leathern bag of gold eagles of the United States.

"Here are a thousand dollars our money or eight of yours. The señor can hold them."

The old Spaniard gravely took the bags. He had no idea where Olaf had got the money, but he had a suspicion that his daughter knew something about it.

Then the birds were put into the pit, which was only a carpet spread on the ground, and the next moment they were standing by the scratch, their feathers bristling, as they crept to and fro, watching for a chance to spring.

The clamor of bets was great and the confusion deafening, but all became still as death a moment later, when both birds sprung aloft and met with a clash.

To the amazement and horror of the men of Tegucigalpa, El Imperador sent El Matador over on his back with a single kick, pounced on him as he lay, caught him with his beak by the back of the head and began to trample the life out of him with a power to which the other with all his pluck and activity, could interpose no effectual resistance.

It was simply overmastering strength that did not bungle or show cowardice, against pluck that had no power to back it. The three pounds extra weight settled the fight.

In fact it was no fight, but a massacre, for El Imperador held on like a bull-dog till he killed his bird, and then uttered a regular dung-hill crow, deep and hoarse, in the midst of

which the abashed creoles of Tegucigalpa began to hand over their money to the little party of Mexicans, and Señor Ximenes, with the sourest of faces, said to Olaf:

"The President's wager is yours, señor. I wish you luck of it all."

The Dane took the bags of money and called to his Indian servant, whom he bid take the bag of huge "copper dollars" wagered by Guartiola, to his quarters, while he put the gold back into his pockets and whispered to Carmelita:

"Our little firm progresses fast. We shall have enough to marry on before we leave this country."

And Carmelita only swung her fan and said:

"Quien sabe, who knows?"

Then the assembly broke up with glum faces, and Senior Ximenes called roughly to his daughter:

"Carmelita, come hither; I wish to see you."

The girl cast a regretful look at her lover, but obeyed quietly, and as Ximenes went away he began in a low angry tone:

"How often am I to tell you you must not encourage that beggar? you may be the first lady in the State if you play your cards well, and make me a millionaire, and here you are compromising yourself with an adventurer who has nothing but his sword. I will not permit it any more. Do you hear?"

"Yes, papa mio," she answered, with the most touching humility. "Just as you shall be best pleased. Only I have told you that I cannot marry that Guartiola. He is a miserable *mestizo* (half-blood) and you know we are proud of our *sangre azul* (blue blood). You would not have me sully our name."

The handsome selfish face of the old man flushed slightly, as he answered in a tone of impatience:

"What do you know about it? You are a child, who would throw herself away if she had no one to take care of her. I wish you to marry him, and drive off this reckless espadachin. Why, we do not even know who he is or where he comes from."

"I know," she answered quietly.

He shook her arm.

"Hold your tongue, I tell you. I am your father, and it is your place to obey me."

"Yes, papa,"

And she did not say another word till she was alone in her room in the large old-fashioned house which had come down from the days of the old Spanish occupation, and cost about ten dollars a year rent.

Then she went softly to the window and put a candle in it for a moment; then withdrew it and repeated the operation thrice, after which she blew it out and watched.

The house faced on the plaza and was just opposite to the large mansion devoted to the suite of the Instructor General at Arms of the State of Honduras, otherwise known as El Rubio Bravo, who, on a salary of thirty dollars a month, (and pickings) already supported three horses and five or six servants.

No sooner had Carmelita's light disappeared than a tall figure wrapped in a cloak left the door of the swordmaster's house and strolled across the plaza in the dusk; for it was already evening, and tropical twilight is short at the best.

He came under the lady's window and a little white note came fluttering down at his feet with which he stalked away past Guartiola's palace and so into the town, where he was suddenly jostled by an individual who said in English and Spanish mixed:

"Excuse me—I mean—what the deuce is it in this blooming lingo—oh yes—*neil pardonas, señor—muy—muy*—oh I wish I knew the confounded stuff—very sorry, I mean."

Olaf looked at him closer and saw the unmistakable face of an Englishman, fat, rosy and fair-haired, and he exclaimed:

"Is it possible? I thought there were none but Greasers in this place. Why, how are you, my friend, and who are you?"

The Englishman, as far as he could be seen in the dark, was a burly heavy-built man, and he at once answered:

"Well, by Jove, this is an unexpected pleasure, you know. Tisn't often a fellow can see a countryman abroad, and when it comes to these bloomin' Greasers, ye know, why they're enough to turn your stomach, when you've seen as much of them as I have. My name? Oh yes. I'm Dr. Brown, licensed last year, ye know, St. Bartholomew's Hospital and all that sort of thing, you know, and, by Jove, I came out here to seek my fortune. And whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

Olaf and he shook hands as the swordmaster said, gayly:

"I am not an Englishman, but I am of the race that gives England all her strength. I am a Norseman, sir, and we are all one. I am Olaf Svenson, a Danish Yankee, by the great roost of St. James. Now we must find a *posada*, for you and I cannot part without cracking a bottle together."

When two men of the so-called Anglo-Saxon race meet in a strange place, their first of thoughts is to take a drink, and our friends were no exception to the rule.

As for Olaf, in his excitement he actually forgot all about the note he had in his bosom from his adored Carmelita, till he and Dr. Brown were sitting by a table with a bottle of Spanish wine beside them, in a humble *posada* or inn, when the Dane suddenly started and said:

"Excuse me a moment, while I read a letter. It is from a lady you know."

The English doctor—he was quite a young fellow, now he was in the full light of a lamp—smiled.

"Aha! An adventure, I see. All right, old boy. Count on me if you need any help."

"I certainly will," answered Olaf, cordially. Then he opened his note and read in Spanish the following effusion:

"My SOUL:—My father is determined I shall marry the infamous Guartiola, and I can only depend on your courage and address to save us both. They are hatching a plot to get rid of you. Be on your guard, and always believe in the undying love of

"Your own
"CARMELITA."

Doctor Brown kept his head discreetly turned away while his comrade was reading, but when Olaf had finished the Dane struck his fist on the table with a force that made the glasses ring.

"It is my Danish luck. Always a fight and always a whitehead for a comrade. My friend, can you shoot and box?"

The big Englishman stared and laughed.

"As for boxing, I can take good care of myself as well as the next man. As for shooting, I can hit a silver dollar every time at twenty yards. Do you expect to do any shooting here?"

"One never knows what may happen, doctor."

CHAPTER V.

OLAF'S STORY.

DR. BROWN—better known among the creoles as Dr. Carlos, his Christian name being Charles, was little more than twenty years old, and his passion for roving had sent him, as a medical student, to the climes of Central America, where he at once dropped into a lucrative practice. He worked when he pleased, had the whole State of Honduras to himself, got ten dollars a visit, and had the honor—if honor it was—of being court physician to the amiable Guartiola.

And still he was not happy, for he had no one to whom he could talk his native tongue, and he made but a poor fist of Spanish. Being full of animal spirits and strength, he was very fond of drinking and boxing, while he was surrounded by temperate Spanish Americans, who never drank anything strong, and who had a horror of what they called "La Boxia."

He had heard of El Rubio Bravo, but had never imagined him as anything but a Spaniard, and had not been present when the Dane fought his duel with Gomez, though he had afterward been called on to treat the fallen espadachin for a sword thrust through the right lung.

His meeting with Olaf, therefore was like a godsend to him, and he could not tear himself away from the Dane.

"And how gets on my friend Pepe Gomez?" asked the swordmaster, after they had exchanged confidences over the third bottle. "Is he going to be able to travel to Tabasco in a hurry?"

"Not under six months if he does well, you know," answered the medico a little thickly; "but then, you know, the beggar's got a devil of a temper and keeps tossing and cursing, so he's in a hot fever half the time, you know. He wants to send a message to a lot of his relations out in Tabasco, but as the brute can't read and I can't write Spanish, it's pretty hard lines, you know."

Olaf told him what he had heard about the Terrible Seven of Tabasco and the doctor pursued.

"Oh, I say, you know, I didn't know that, you know. The black muzzled thief! So he wants to set the whole gang on you, does he? Not if the court know herself, which she think she do. He can carry his own blooming message when he gets well, and I've a good mind not to treat him any more."

"Oh no. Treat him and cure him for my sake, my dear friend."

"Well, I will, but I hate to. And how do you like this blooming country, colonel?"

"The country is grand," cried Olaf; "but the people are—well, you know."

"I should think I did. A lot of rascally Greasers, with only one aim in life, to cut each other's throats, you know! Even the women go to see cock-fights and bull-fights and holler as loud as the men."

"What! do they have bull-fights here?"

"Yes. What *they* call bull-fights, but bless your soul, nothing like the real thing you know. Tame bulls, and they saw their horns off, you know. It's a blooming sell."

"Still, every one goes, I suppose."

"Oh yes. Every Sunday, you know. Tomorrow's Sunday, by-the-by. Are you going?"

"Of course, my friend. We'll meet there. Now it is time to say good-night."

But the doctor insisted on seeing the Dane home, and would not leave him till they had

sworn eternal friendship, while he was round at the other's quarters in the morning long before breakfast, and did not leave him for the rest of the day.

Yet Olaf noticed, with all the young doctor's hard drinking and reckless ways, that he was a perfect gentleman.

He had never asked the Dane a single private or personal question, though he would not have been human had he not felt some curiosity as to Olaf's love affair.

He simply waited till the other was ready to tell him, which occurred just after the people were coming out from mass and while the *torreadors* were fixing up the bull ring in true creole style.

"My friend," said the Dane, "I want your help, and to make you understand things, I must tell you a story."

"All right, old fellow, I'm agreeable," was the truly British reply, as the doctor lighted a cigar and composed himself to listen.

"You must know," began Olaf, "that there is a lady in the case."

"Of course. There always is. Pretty?"

"As an angel!"

The doctor gave a heavy puff but said nothing.

"You have seen her," pursued Olaf.

"Who? I?"

"Yes. You know Don Carlos Ximenes?"

"Old Indigo. I should say so. Came here only six months ago, and is worth more than any man in Honduras to-day."

"Very well. His daughter is the lady."

Brown whistled.

"By Jove, I say, you know, you've dashed good taste, you know, and all that sort of thing, but then—"

"Then what?"

"Why, you know, Old Wickedness is sweet there, and you've no chance."

"Who's Old Wickedness?"

Brown lowered his voice.

"By Jove, you know, it's risky to talk too loud about him. I mean Guartiola."

"Why do they call him Old Wickedness?"

"Don't you know?"

The ruddy face of the young doctor was a trifle pale, and his voice sunk to a whisper.

"There is not a bigger blackguard this side of the hot place down-stairs. Why he's—Never mind. Picture murder—his own brother, one of the poor fellows—robbery—he called it confiscation—poisonings and all sorts of crime against men, with a record on the woman side too horrible to talk of. That's Old Wickedness. There's nothing bad he hasn't done, I believe."

"How do you know all this?"

"I hear it everywhere. People confide in a doctor or a priest, you know. If he's set eyes on that girl, he'll have her."

Olaf frowned slightly.

"By the great roost of St. James, he'll not."

"Ah! you don't know him, colonel."

"On the contrary, he does not know me. A man who has beaten Czar Nicholas on his throne is not likely to be beaten by a Greaser like Guartiola."

Brown looked obstinate.

"He'll have you assassinated."

"If he can catch me in the dark unarmed. But I don't go about in that fashion."

"All right, colonel. I'll stand by you, revolver and all."

The doctor threw back the loose coat he wore, and showed a pair of navy revolvers in a belt at his back.

Olaf smiled approvingly.

"Our race stand by each other. Now I'll tell you all about this."

"I am listening."

"Three years ago I met Ximenes and his daughter in Spain. I was a colonel at court, and had plenty of money; he a rich Cuban on a visit to Madrid. I went to Havana in the same ship with him as Instructor to the Cuban forces. On the voyage they had a great hurricane, and the *senorita*, who insisted on being on deck, was washed overboard by a wave. I took a life-buoy and jumped after her in all the tempest. Well, we were saved, and she loved me a little. At Havana I beat all the fencers, and fought nine duels for her. At the ninth she loved me entirely. Then I took the yellow fever, and one of my rivals, a fencing-master of Havana, bribed a barber to bleed me in such a way as to disable me, while I was delirious. When I recovered, the tendon of my right arm was cut nearly through, and it healed up short, so that I had to give up my situation. Then, when I was penniless, Ximenes, who had fawned on me in my prosperity, turned against me, forbade me his house, and finally carried off his daughter to Honduras, leaving me, as all thought, a cripple for life."

"Hard lines," observed Brown, sagaciously.

"Yes, indeed. But my race are hard to beat. My arm was shrunk up, but I set to work to get it straight."

"How?" asked the doctor incredulously.

"By hard work at it. Oh, how it hurt at first. When I struck out I had to grind my teeth to keep from yelling out. But I kept on at it, and about a month ago got the tendon

stretched and the arm straight at last. Then, when my savings were nearly gone, I came here to search for my Carmelita, and I found her making eyes at Guartiola."

The doctor coughed.

"Are you quite sure that?"

"That what? Speak out."

"It may offend you."

"I shall not be offended."

"Well, then, are you quite sure your Carmelita is a good woman to tie to?"

The Dane hesitated, gnawed his lip, and then broke out:

"No, I'm not."

"Then why do you follow her?"

"Because — because I am infatuated with her. She is a coquette, and I am jealous, but she is only coquettish, and she is so beautiful."

"That is true. But beauty is only skin deep."

"Oh, a truce to proverbs. I want you to help me."

"All right. As I said, I am ready."

"I am going to try and see Carmelita. Her father keeps her in the house except when she goes out in public in Guartiola's company, and I have no chance except at a ball, but I know a way. I will climb up from the garden to her window, if you will watch below."

The doctor laughed heartily.

"With pleasure. And I have a scheme of my own. While you meet the señorita upstairs, I will have my little affair down-stairs."

"With whom? — Excuse me, I did not mean to ask — never mind."

And Olaf laughed at his slip of manners.

Doctor Brown smiled.

"It is no secret. Don Ramon Garcia, the Prime Minister, has a daughter too, and she is teaching me Spanish. I can't learn from a master, so I'm trying a mistress. I'll take a Spanish lesson in the garden, and if any one comes, he can look out for squalls."

"All right, doctor," and so it was arranged.

Then the plaza began to fill with people and the two new-made friends strolled over to see the bull-fight, which turned out to be as the doctor had said, a "complete sell," as far as regarded excitement and danger, compared with the real thing as carried on at Madrid or even Havana, the bulls being tame and stupid, with little capacity to fight.

Indeed Olaf was so scornful of the whole business that he cried out in Guartiola's hearing:

"Bah! call those men *torreadores*! I believe I could kill such bulls as they have here myself."

Instantly the President turned his evil face toward him and sneered:

"You kill a bull! Bah! I will bet you twenty thousand dollars you dare not stay in the ring when the bull makes for you in earnest."

"I'll take the bet," cried Olaf recklessly, and Guartiola eagerly snapped out:

"Done! I'll have the bull ready next Sunday, and then take care of yourself, my bold Rubio."

The swordmaster bowed and said in a low tone to Brown:

"They don't back our race down, do they?"

To which the young Briton answered:

"The blooming Greaser will try to put up a job on you, colonel. See if he doesn't."

Guartiola glanced suspiciously at them, for he understood no English, but he made no remark, and the crowd soon after broke up when Olaf and Brown repaired to the former's quarters and the Dane said gravely:

"Now, my friend, I shall really need your help. I never was in a bull-ring in my life, and I have only a week in which to study bull anatomy and the science of the torreador. Tomorrow morning we must take a ride to old Garcia's estancia and get our first lesson."

"Agreed," said Brown cordially. "But how about our little interviews in the garden tonight. Do they go on?"

Olaf shook his head dryly.

"One thing at a time. The love-making can wait; the bulls won't wait."

CHAPTER VI.

A LESSON IN KILLING COWS.

JUST as the early streaks of dawn hung gray over the summit of Monte Balboa in the east, two men on handsome little horses drew rein before a long stone building some miles from Tegucigalpa, and the biggest of the two shouted in his broken Spanish:

"Holloa! Pedrillo! Venga, venga — what the deuce do you call it — come out here! venaca! venaca! We want a cow, a bull, an ox. Vaca! vaca!"

A little shriveled Indian came out with a grin on his face, saying:

"Como lo pasa, señor, como lo pasa? Su criado de usted. Que quiere vuestra merced?" [How are you, sir, how are you? Your worship's servant. What does your worship want?]

It was Olaf who answered:

"We want to learn how to kill a bull, my friend. How much will you charge to let us try?"

The old Indian looked astonished.

"To kill a bull! But your worship is not a butcher or a bull-fighter."

"Never mind. How do you sell your cattle?"

"Two dollars apiece, señor. Do you wish it tied or loose?"

Pedrillo realized that he had before him an original.

"Tied for to-day and I need your help," was the answer. "I'll buy three beasts at once, no matter what kind."

The two men dismounted and tied their horses, while the old Indian jumped on a pony close by, went down to the open fields round the estancia, and presently came back dragging a vicious looking red cow at the end of a lasso, full tilt.

The two Anglo-Saxons had to scamper out of the way as the beast came up, for it made a vicious dash at them as it passed and Pedrillo cried out:

"Here is your animal, señores. Kill it and welcome."

"The grinning old scoundrel is trying to fool us," growled Brown. "Tell him to take the to the killing wheel."

Olaf obeyed the injunction and Pedrillo galloped away dragging the cow after him till he came to a huge wheel with a small barrel, round which was coiled a stout rope with a noose at the end.

"Throw the noose over, señores," he shouted.

Olaf ran forward, picked up the noose as the Indian dragged the cow near the wheel and cast it over the horns of the struggling animal, just in time to escape a dig of her sharp horns.

With a malicious grin at the clumsiness of the "Gringos," Pedrillo let go the other lasso from the horn of his saddle and away went the cow jumping and shaking her head to the end of the second lasso, the wheel whizzing round till she reached the end of the lasso, then stopping with a shock that tested the heavy framework severely. Then the animal went ramping around at the end of the lasso, while Pedrillo sat on his horse laughing, and the two Gringos stood looking doubtfully on.

"I say," observed Brown, "that blooming brute isn't so easy to kill, is she? If that's the way the cows go on, old man, what will you do with the bulls?"

Olaf compressed his lips.

"I have a job before me," he said. "It is like learning a new weapon. But I'll master it in a week. See if I don't."

He called to Pedrillo angrily.

"Stop your grinning and come here. Now tell us what we are to do."

"Why, kill the cow, of course, señores."

Pedrillo was civil but sly.

Olaf drew out a revolver.

"That's easily done, my friend, but I don't want to use this. Show me how you would go to work yourself to kill her."

Pedrillo grinned.

"Me, señor? Oh, if I wanted to kill that cow I would wind her up first and then give her the matador stab."

Olaf drew out a couple of dollars.

"Go to work and do it."

Instantly Pedrillo was off like a shot. He jumped from his horse, ran in, nimbly evading a side rush of the cow and in another moment was turning the huge wheel as hard as he could turn it.

The cow, seeing an enemy, came plunging in with a slack rope, and thus was wound up short without any trouble, till she came to the wheel, when she was checked in trying to get round it at the Indian, and both stuck fast.

"Tease her out, señores, or I can't get her wound up," cried Pedrillo, impatiently. "Don't you understand?"

Olaf ran in and yelled at the angry cow, which instantly turned on him and cleared herself of the wheel.

No sooner was the lasso stretched again than the old Indian commenced winding it up again; and in a few seconds, thanks to the tremendous power of the wheel, the poor cow was wound up with her head against the barrel of the machine, kicking and bellowing but powerless.

Pedrillo quietly put the check rope on one of the spokes of the wheel and said to Olaf:

"There is your cow, señor, kill her."

"Show me how to do it first," said the Dane.

Pedrillo grinned again and walked over to the barrel of the wheel.

"You see the cow's neck?" he said. "Just here, where the shoulders begin is one place, and here at the root of the horns is another. Shall I kill her or will you?"

"I will try," said Olaf, and he drew his sword. "Which is the place to strike in a bull-fight?"

"Here," replied Pedrillo. "With full force and let the sword pierce the heart."

The swordmaster plunged the blade into the bound animal, and Pedrillo nodded.

"Good! I could not have done better myself. You see she is dead."

And it was true, for the cow had dropped as if struck by lightning, and when they let down the rope not a quiver could be seen in the carcass.

"We will try another cow, Pedrillo," said the swordmaster quietly. "Bring her up and I'll try her without the wheel."

Pedrillo did not grin any more as he set out.

"Your worship learns quickly," he said.

Presently he brought up a young steer wilder than the cow, and dragged it to Olaf, plunging and kicking, when the Dane, with an exertion of all his agility and watchfulness rushed in and tried to inflict the fatal stab.

But he found that a lively steer even at the end of a rope, is not so easy to kill and it was only at the third attempt, and after having twice wounded the poor creature that he was able to plant the stab of the matador.

"That is enough for to-day, doctor," he observed. "The sun is getting up, and we want to be back in Tegucigalpa before they find out where we have been."

"That's the ticket," responded Brown in his most sententious manner. "Don't let the Greasers know how you know or what you know. Keep dark, till the bull-fight."

They paid Pedrillo for his cattle with strict injunctions to keep secret the fact of their being there, and rode back to the city.

As they rode into the plaza, they saw Don Ramon Garcia, owner of the estancia to which they had just been, coming out of the President's palace and saluted him cordially.

"Beautiful morning for a ride, Don Ramon."

"Beautiful, señores. But I prefer my bed."

CHAPTER VII.

TROPICAL EVENINGS.

THE night before the bull-fight in which El Rubio Bravo was to kill his bull on a bet with the President, was full moonlight.

The city was full of excitement at the prospect of a novelty, and it was whispered about that the President had sent to one of his own private haciendas, far up in the mountains, for a fierce bull, who was said to be a *seguidor*.

A *seguidor* or "follower" is the most ferocious and dangerous of his kind, and much feared by the boldest bull-fighters.

The ordinary bull, when he is teased by the *picadores* and *banderilleros* — prickers and flagmen — exhausts himself in a series of straight rushes and shuts his eyes at the moment he thinks he can hit his enemy.

This is the salvation of the *torreador* — bull-man, a name including all kinds engaged in the sport. He has only to spring to one side to be safe, and long practice gives him wonderful skill and daring in waiting for the last moment. But there are bulls now and then which do not shut their eyes and which turn on a single *torreador*, following him up and not permitting the others to divert their attention from a victim.

These *seguidores* are justly dreaded and it was rumored that Guartiola had secured such a beast to fight the boasting Americano.

"Serve him right," growled one of the regular staff of the bull-ring. "He must needs come round here, bragging about what he has seen and calling our bulls fools. We'll see if he can kill one or whether the bull will kill him. He'll find it's not as easy as it looks."

Master Pepe Gomez, sitting up in bed and coughing horribly in a spasm of pain, heard the news and ground his teeth with great satisfaction.

"Maybe the bull will avenge me before I can get news to my brothers. Why is it I cannot find a man to go to them?"

The wounded espadachin was worn to a shadow of his former confident, hectoring self under the drain of his lung wound, and had but little money left.

As he lay looking from the window he saw the erect, lithe figure of the Dane cross the plaza in the cool of the evening, arm in arm with the burly English doctor and he cursed him heartily as he shook his fist in impotent rage.

"What is it señor? Why do you curse so?" asked a gentle oleaginous sort of voice at that moment.

Pepe Gomez looked round and saw the smooth face of Don Ramon Garcia.

"I am tied here hand and foot," he groaned, "and I cannot get word to my brothers of where I am."

"That is very sad," said Ramon soothingly.

"I am told that you have seven brothers."

"Six and my cousin, Isidoro Bragamonte," was the eager answer, for Pepe began to suspect that the Prime Minister of Honduras had not entered his hovel for nothing.

It was only a hovel, where Gomez was waited on by a single Indian servant, and yet here was Don Ramon Garcia stealing in as softly as a cat, to sit by the bedside of a dying espadachin.

"Six and Bragamonte?" he repeated musingly.

"They are all good men with the sword?"

"As good as I, señor. Bragamonte is, however, better than any of us."

Don Ramon looked cautiously round to see that no one was listening and then said:

"You were wounded by the Americano, and you want revenge. Is it not so?"

"Yes. But how am I to get it?"

"How could you get it?"

"If I could get word to my brothers."

"Write a letter then, and I will send it."

Pepe looked confused.

"Señor, I cannot — cannot write."

"I can. Tell me what you want to say."

The Don took out a pocket inkstand, a pen and some paper, as if he had come fully prepared, and sat down.

"How shall I begin? To whom shall I write?"

Pepe's eyes glistened.

"To General Isidoro Bragamonte, at San Miguel."

Garcia wrote.

"What next?"

"Write this; 'My dear cousin.'"

"My dear cousin," repeated Garcia.

"I have been hurt by an American who fences like a devil. His name is Olavo Sovensone, and they call him El Rubio Bravo. He is here now. He is a good man on whom to try your private wrist trick. Tell the brothers, and come quickly."

"Is that all?" asked Garcia, after a good deal of scratching away.

"That is all. He will know."

"But you must sign this."

Pepe took the pen and made a cross at the bottom of the paper.

"That will do as soon as my cousin sees it. He will not escape from Bragamonte's sword. How will you send it?"

"By a special messenger."

Pepe grinned, but presently he said:

"How is it that you are willing to do this when this man is in the service of your own government and a friend of the President?"

Don Ramon smiled slightly.

"Who knows? Perhaps the President is tired of him; perhaps he fears him; perhaps he is jealous of him. Anyway he is dangerous, and we must get rid of him."

Pepe nodded.

"He shall be got rid of. Bragamonte will tell the rest and he cannot escape all."

"Your brothers will waylay him?" said the minister inquiringly.

Pepe shook his head, frowning.

"No, no, they are not assassins but honest espadachins. They will challenge him when they meet him, one after another, and then let the Rubio look out for himself. Every one has a different style."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean a different style of fighting. There is Pedrillo whose forte is the creep and spring; Jose Jesus and Jose Maria who do it by main strength; Gil, whose best point is with the knife, and in throwing it; Domingo who excels in the rally; Martino, who has lamed all his opponents, and Bragamonte, whose wrist trick is effective, against the best fencers particularly. Between them, they can kill any man alive."

Don Ramon nodded, as one very well satisfied and rose to depart just as the full moon looked in at the window.

"Keep up your spirits, Pepe, and you shall be avenged," he said, and then he went away.

Being after sunset, and twilight being over, it was already dark in the shadows of the moon, but the minister was surprised to see in the moonlight, a man stealing away from behind Pepe's cabin, in whom he thought he recognized the figure of his own vaquero, Pedrillo.

How the man came there he could not imagine, as his duties led him to the city only on a holiday; but he could not be sure it was Pedrillo, for when he called to the stealthy figure, it ran on and was soon lost to sight in the shadows of a side street.

Don Ramon returned to his own house, buried in thought, muttering:

"If that man was Pedrillo, he heard our talk. But what of that? He is my peon, and if he is too open-mouthed I may have to shut it and him up together."

Already the town was sunk in repose, for the people were early sleepers, except when there was a ball on foot.

The only beings awake were the lovers, who were tinkling mandolins in the gardens and singing confidentially to each other.

Don Ramon went to his own house full of virtuous respectability, found everything as quiet as could be, and went over to smoke a cigarito with his neighbor, Don Carlos Ximenes, when the two old gentlemen discussed the nuisance of having the Americanos in the State; and the Honduras Don confided to the Cuban Don the fact that another Gringo, that English medico, seemed to be more than a little agreeable to little Pepita, "my child, señor, and one whom I destined for my friend, Don Isidoro Bragamonte, chief of cavalry in the service of San Salvador; but since that big Rubio has come here, she thinks of nothing else but learning the English tongue, and teaching him Spanish."

"Then you should forbid him the house," said the Cuban decidedly. "That is what I did when my daughter showed too much favor to Rubio."

"But this fellow is the court physician, and a great favorite of Guardiola's. There is no way to get rid of him except—except—"

"Except what, my friend?"

Don Ramon lowered his voice.

"Except a pronunciamiento and another revolution."

Don Carlos threw up his hands in horror.

"By no means. I have put all my money into indigo, and have not a bag shipped yet."

Postpone it, my friend, till next month at the very least. Give me time to realize."

"But in the meantime my daughter may run away with this *maldito Gringo*."

"Not she. Leave it to me. I will devise a scheme by which we will keep this big lubberly Rubio from coming near your house for months to come."

"But in a revolution, my friend, we could kill him and get rid of him for good. You see half the army would follow me, and all are tired of Guardiola. It is only necessary to kill him first, for many fear him."

"And who would be the new President?" asked the Cuban curiously.

"Hard to tell. You see I should issue a general proclamation, calling on the people to revise the constitution and proclaiming an election. Then the troops rise and we kill Guardiola. Then the people vote, and generally choose the man who has killed the last ruler."

"Then *you* would be President," said Ximenes.

"Possibly. In the meantime try another of my *puros*. They smoke well."

Thus they tranquilly discussed revolution for the sake of breaking off a love affair, and after quite a long conversation went to their hammocks in tranquillity.

Don Ramon went to his own house by a back way through the garden door, and was surprised to find it wide open.

Instantly suspecting an intrigue he went back for Don Carlos; called him; and the two old gentlemen, one carrying a long knife, the other a sword-cane, began to prowl about in the shrubbery of Don Ramon's house, but all in vain.

They could see no one and hear nothing.

"Wait a moment," quoth the Prime Minister, and he ran up to his daughter's room, which he found empty, and then came down stairs pale with rage, hissing:

"She has gone to meet this Gringo. Where are they?"

"How should I know?" quoth Don Carlos in a testy way. "I don't keep watch over your daughter, it is enough to look after *my own*."

"They are great friends," whispered Don Ramon. "They may be in your garden now. Let us search."

The supposition was too much for the Cuban.

"In *my* garden? Then that cursed Rubio Bravo is at the bottom of it. Come, let us go!"

They hurried round to the next wall, and as they had begun to expect, found the door of the garden unlocked.

Softly they stole in, and presently Don Ramon pulled the sleeve of Ximenes.

They could hear the murmur of voices among the leaves of the orange trees.

Presently the sounds became plain and this was what the two old gentlemen heard. First there was a deep powerful male voice talking in execrable Spanish, then came a sweet girlish treble giving out broken English; and they seemed to be rehearsing a lesson.

The male voice spoke first.

"*Yo ti amo*—is that the way to say it?"

"*Si, si*," with a little giggle. "*Yo ti amo, yo ti amo*. You say *eem ver' vell*. Dat mean I loaf you in *Ingles*."

"Say it again, Pepita. You didn't pronounce that right. Say 'I love you.'"

"I leave you," said the girl's voice, and then they heard a slight osculation.

"Now let's get on to the rest of the lesson," said the male voice. "What do you call this in Spanish?"

"*Mis manos*," said the girl. "Vat you say en *Ingles*, Carlos, *mi vida*?"

"Those? Those are my hands, Pepita, my hands."

"*Mai andes*—ah! dat is not eet—*Ma handos*—no—ow you say 'eem?'

"My hands, Pepita; no, I mean your hand, that is to say it's yours now, but it will be mine very soon; so I may as well kiss it for luck."

"Ah, Carlos!"

Then there was another little giggle and Don Ramon ground his teeth.

They stole forward and beheld in the moonlight among the orange trees Dr. Brown, his hat off and his flaxen curly head gleaming in the light, while one arm was passed around the waist of a very pretty Spanish girl, whose black hair was lying all over his white jacket; for Charley Brown dressed in the coolest of tropical garments, loose and easy.

"I wonder," remarked Dr. Charley presently, "whether Ole and Carmen are enjoying themselves as much as you and I, Pepita. They're quiet enough over it, if they are."

The girl evidently did not understand all his English, for she answered.

"Vat you mean, Carlos? Say *eem* in *Espanol*."

Charley scratched his head.

"*Quiero decir*—I mean to say that Ole and Carmen are very quiet—*muy—muy*—what do you call quiet?"

The answer was not destined to be given that night, for Don Ramon could no longer contain his fury, and he rushed forward with a string of Spanish imprecations to grasp his daughter's arm, while she jumped up with a shriek, and

Charley caught her to his breast and whipped out a revolver as quick as a flash, crying:

"Halt, you blooming Greaser assassin! Who are you trying your tricks on?"

"Oh, *Carlos, es mi padre!*" faltered the girl, turning deadly pale, and Don Ramon, who had recoiled before the muzzle of the revolver, hissed out.

"Yes, sare, her fader—you 'ear? her fader—Gif-a-me ma dautare—Carajo!"

Charley Brown put up his weapon.

"Of course, I don't want to hurt you, sir. I expect to have you for a father-in-law some day, but in the meantime I can't let you hurt this young lady. It's not our way."

The creole did not understand him fully, but he repeated more quietly.

"Gif-a-me ma dautare."

And Pepita—not half so much afraid as she might have looked, came over to him and was about to be carried off, when Don Carlos Ximenes uttered a cry of rage, and dashed into a neighboring thicket, where he found Carmelita and the Danish swordmaster, sitting with their arms around each other, looking on quietly through the screen of leaves.

The old Cuban rushed at his daughter and shook her soundly, when Charley Brown dashed after him and tore him away saying:

"Come old fellow, you're not going to be my father-in-law, so I can handle you. Leave that lady alone. Ole, do me the same favor, you understand?"

The quick-witted Dane jumped up and ran after Don Ramon whom he brought back to Charley with Pepita on his arm.

"Take care of your own girl, Charley," he said. "I'll take care of the old man."

"And I'll take care of yours," was the reply. "You're not supposed to punch your own father-in-law you know; but you can punch mine all you like and vice versa."

They was beheld a curious spectacle. Doctor Charley had Don Carlos Ximenes by the collar with one hand, while he wrenched away from him with the other the sword-cane which the old man was too nervous to use.

On the other side El Rubio Bravo had Don Ramon Garcia by the hair of the head with one hand while he threatened him with the knife he had just taken from him.

And thus it came to pass that on one side Pepita Garcia was on her knees to Olaf imploring him to spare her father's life, while Carmelita Ximenes, on the other, was saying:

"Ah, Señor Don Carlos, do not hurt him. He is my father."

But both men were inexorably stern and deaf to the voice of the charmer, perhaps because they did not dare to do otherwise for fear of exciting jealousies.

As for the two old men the situation was full of hardship to them, for each was in the power of a man who could strangle him and over whom he had no control. And the only way of escape for either was to call on his daughter's lover for help which each hated to do.

Thus matters stood for about half a minute when Charley Brown cried out in English:

"I'm going to thrash your father-in-law, Ole."

And the Dane retorted:

"Then I shall pommel yours, Charley."

And they both began to shake their victims till Don Carlos screamed out:

"Help, Don Olavo, this English brute will kill me. Quick! quick!"

Olaf only shook Don Ramon harder till the old creole cried to Charley for help.

Then both men dropped their prisoners and sprung to the assistance of the old gentlemen, and in a moment all was peace.

Ten minutes later the garden was empty and two men were entering the quarters of El Rubio Bravo, followed by a third, who was telling them something.

The third man was Pedrillo, the vaquero.

CHAPTER VIII.

EL SEGUIDOR.

SUNDAY had come; mass was over; the people of Tegucigalpa had dined, and the bull-ring, with its rows on rows of seats, one above the other, was packed with bright colors from the palisades to the top boxes.

Rancheros and indigo planters, with their wives and daughters, in picturesque costumes, with velvet and gold jackets for the men, silk skirts and black lace mantillas for the girls, crowded the bull-ring.

Conspicuous above all was President Guardiola's box, full of brilliant uniforms and bright dresses of ladies. Doctor Charley was there in uniform as surgeon-general to the armies of Honduras, for titles were cheap at Guardiola's court.

But around and below all were the real masters of Honduras in the people, who felt that they could always change their government when they pleased, by the simple process of revolution.

Guardiola, with all his rapacity, cruelty and murders, with all the forms of outward respect that surrounded him, yet realized that he was but a servant to the mob that surrounded him

and began to feel more and more uneasy every day.

And now it was nearly four in the afternoon, and the shadow of Monte del Matador fell on the plaza, and the people round the bull-ring began to stamp and shout:

"*El toro, el toro!*" [The bull, the bull.]

They were impatient to begin.

After a little more delay there was a sound of drums and trumpets; the gates to the ring flew open, and in rode the four picadors on lean worn-out old horses, only fit to die.

The men were dressed in gay silk jackets and beribboned hats, their legs and thighs to the waist protected by heavy leathern guards, and they carried long spears in their hands.

They rode round twice and were followed by the banderilleros, a score of clean-built, active young fellows, in gay silk jackets, short breeches and stockings, with the lightest of slippers, who bounded into the ring, with little red flags, and bundles of small darts carrying long streamers of ribbon.

Then the procession passed out, and the cry of "*El toro!*" was renewed, louder than ever.

Presently the trumpets sounded again, the gates were flung open and into the ring, followed by a spitting shower of crackers, dashed a handsome red bull, with a lean wiry look about him that portended a good fight, and made the people roar with delight at the sight.

Not for long did they remain pleased, however. The bull ramped up and down, smelt at the barriers all round as if to find a way to escape, and finally uttered a low bellow of dissatisfaction.

Then the people howled out:

"*Los picadores! Los picadores!*"

The picadores or pikemen took the hint and rode in, when the bull being a good fighter charged them at once.

There were four picadors, and each tried to divert the bull from his comrades by pricking him in the rear whenever he charged one of the number.

They could not divert this bull, however. He gored one horse the first rush, and then knelt on the carcass to jab his horn into the struggling rider.

When the other picadors stabbed him in the rear he only went more fiercely at the fallen man, and they had to call in all the banderilleros together to attract his attention elsewhere and save the life of the victim of his fury.

Then he dashed away at the other picadors and gored a second horse and a third in less than two minutes.

The last picador was glad to get off his horse and climb over the barrier to escape.

Then the banderilleros began to play about the bull, throwing darts into his skin and trying how close they could come to his horns without being gored.

But the fact of this bull being a *seguidor* or "follower" was soon plainly visible, for he chased individual banderilleros so fiercely that one by one he drove them out of the ring and people began to roar again:

"*El Matador! El Matador!*"

Doctor Charley Brown, who had looked on at the bull-fight so far with much indifference, now began to manifest a great deal of uneasiness.

He made his way down to the edge of the bull-ring, where he suddenly produced a pair of navy revolvers, from which all the neighborhood shrank back, and laid them on the railing beside him, where he sat with his legs dangling over, ready to jump down into the ring.

The cries of "*El Matador!*" (The Killer) went on, and presently the trumpets sounded again, and into the ring walked El Rubio Bravo himself, in his usual dress, carrying a drawn sword and a broad square flag of bright scarlet.

The banderilleros made a grand rush at the bull as soon as Olaf entered, yelling at the beast, flinging showers of darts, most of which had lighted squibs at the hinder end, and generally using all their endeavors to excite the utmost possible burst of rage.

In this they were completely successful, for the bull was not by any means exhausted, and it was only by working in perfect concert in his rear that they succeeded in saving one of their number from death.

Then came a second blast of trumpets and all scattered and leaped over the barriers, leaving the bull and the matador face to face.

Olaf was just bowing to the President's box where were seated Carmelita and Pepita side by side, when the bull caught sight of him, uttered a low bellow and came for him on a rush.

The Dane did not alter one iota of the profundity of his salute till it was completed and the bull was within ten feet of him, when he turned and flapped his red banner into the animal's face with a step to one side that brought down the house, so coolly was it done.

The foiled bull rushed on only a few feet when it turned again and made a second savage rush.

Flap came the scarlet banner in his face and again he was foiled.

But this time he turned inwards on Olaf and the next moment was following the Dane closely round the ring, step for step, the man

springing from side to side behind the red flag; the bull shaking his head, lunging desperately and coming closer all the time.

The people howled and shouted with glee, for they saw the bull was getting the better of the man, and their sympathies were against the boastful foreigner whose brag had been magnified by hundreds of envious tongues.

"*Bravo, toro, bravo!*" they roared, and Olaf who had all he could do to keep out of the way of the furious bull, heard the cry, and felt for the first time, a sensation very like despair.

He found that bull-fighting, even in Honduras, was not such an easy affair after all and that the position of a matador, though only requiring him to deliver a single blow, was yet one requiring more skill and nerve than all the rest.

He could see the spot where he knew the sword must be plunged plain enough, but the trouble was to get the bull to hold still long enough to enable him to plant the thrust.

And in the mean time he had to keep out of the way of the bull's horns, which were shaking and stabbing within a few inches of his body, while the people were hooting and jeering and he knew that Guartiola was smiling to think how his plan had succeeded.

Doctor Charley Brown saw the danger and he picked up and cocked both his pistols, shouting defiantly:

"Give him fair play! I'll shoot the first man that interferes!"

Then came a roar from the people as the matador's foot slipped and he nearly fell. In most cases such an accident would have provoked a rush of *torreros* to the rescue, but the sympathy was against Olaf, and the populace only jeered.

Olaf heard the jeer and it stung him to the core, for he was an intensely vain man.

He ran several feet to one side making for the bull's tail, thereby securing nearly a second of time and held the banner before him with the left, while he poised the sword with his right.

Inside the second the bull was on him and there was no chance to escape.

The flag was in its face, but the horns were touching the Dane's body when he fell forward on the bull's neck, burying the sword up to the very hilt.

The bull dropped as if struck by lightning. The impetus it had acquired pitched it on its knees and head, but that was all. It was stone dead before it reached the ground.

The Dane's sword had made a masterstroke, dividing the spinal marrow and splitting the heart in twain.

Half-incredulous himself of his own good luck, he was yet quick-witted enough to embrace and turn it to advantage, so he turned to the box where Guartiola sat and saluted it with a low bow and a wave of the sword toward the dead bull, executed with distinguished grace.

For a moment the people were silent, and then they burst into a perfect whirlwind of applause.

"*El Rubio Bravo! El Rey Espado!*"

The Dane had conquered them, and no one but himself knew how nearly he had fallen in the effort.

As it was, they attributed his previous conduct before the bull, not to awkwardness or fear but simply to a deliberate provocation to increase the excitement and suspense.

They swarmed over the barriers, invaded the ring, seized the triumphant matador and carried him on their shoulders to the President's box, where he was received by Guartiola with distinguished civility in presence of so many people, though the half-breed's heart was inwardly raging over the renewed triumph of one he began to hate as his rival in love.

Moreover, he had just lost twenty thousand dollars, for Olaf had killed the bull as he had said he would and as Guartiola had bet he would not.

And that made thirty-six thousand dollars which the Scandinavian swordsman had beaten out of Guartiola from first to last.

True, they were only Honduras dollars, so debased as to be worth only twelve-and-a-half cents apiece; but even so there were forty-five hundred good solid gold dollars involved in the swordmaster's winnings, and the loss was more than Guartiola could afford.

He paid over the money with a sour face, but from that moment Olaf saw that his doom was sealed if he remained in the city of Tegucigalpa, and he began to cast about him for means of escape.

CHAPTER IX.

BRAGAMONTE.

THREE weeks after the bull-fight in which Olaf had so astonished the natives, he was lying in bed in the early dawn of the morning, half asleep, when his door was burst violently open, and in rushed a tall, dark man, with a ferocious mustache on his face and a drawn sword in his hand. The swordmaster's room was on the ground floor—in fact most Central American houses are of one story on account of earthquakes—and the door opened on the plaza.

"Come out, and fight me," roared the man with the huge mustache, and as he spoke he

drew back his sword as if to make a thrust at the recumbent Dane.

But Olaf was not used to carry his life in his hand for nothing, and the door had hardly opened before the revolver under his pillow was cocked and leveled, while he growled:

"Stay where you are or—!"

The sight and sound of the clicking lock overawed the other who recoiled to the door and the Dane went on:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am General Isidoro Bragamonte, chief of cavalry to the State of Guatemala and I challenge you to follow me to the plaza and give me a chance to avenge my honor and that of my family."

The dark man roared this in a tone that would have overawed most men, but he did not advance on the pistol.

Olaf smiled composedly.

"You do not want me to go out in my shirt, I suppose, Bragamonte?"

"No matter how. You must come or I will proclaim you a coward who has wounded my cousin Gomez by foul play," bellowed Bragamonte, flourishing his sword furiously.

"Get out of that!" suddenly hissed the Dane and he started up in bed and looked so dangerous behind his pistol that the dark man went through the door like a shot.

Olaf ran to the doorway and fired a bullet through his hat when he took to his heels, and the Dane rapidly pulled on his trowsers and boots and went out. He saw Bragamonte in the middle of the plaza and heard him yelling:

"The sword! the sword! You dare not face my sword, coward of a Rubio!"

El Rubio Bravo saw a crowd of men gathering to watch the antics of this seeming madman, and noticed his friend Charley Brown hurrying toward him with his inevitable revolver in each hand.

He stalked back into his quarters, picked up his sword and came out again.

"See fair play, Charley," was all he said to the young Briton. "This is Bragamonte, that Pedrillo told us of."

Charley nodded and waved his pistols in such a way that scattered the creole crowd in a moment, when Olaf stalked up to Bragamonte with the curt salute:

"I'm ready. Come on!"

He had heard of Bragamonte from Don Ramon's vaquero, Pedrillo, who had listened to the interview between his master and Gomez and knew that although a furious braggart, he was also counted the most dangerous man in Honduras.

No sooner did Bragamonte see him than he rushed at him and began to cut in the same wild, furious way which marked the practice of the ordinary espadachin, but without as much leaping as had marked the play of his cousin Gomez.

Olaf watched him closely in the same way he had watched Pepe, keeping his point to the other's face and presently Bragamonte tried to confuse him by a high feint at his head ending in a furious cut down at his very toes.

The Dane felt himself cut and the sting made him savage. He made a furious blow at the other's head which was parried in carte, then beat over in tierce. The moment he did so Bragamonte drove his own blade high in air and made a clutch at the Dane's sword-wrist with his left hand.

"Aha!"

Olaf uttered a savage shout and the next moment had drawn his sword out of danger, grasped the other's sword-wrist like a flash and driven his blade through the center of the bull's body a foot beyond his back.

Bragamonte uttered a choking roar of rage and despair and fell back on the plaza, Olaf leaping back holding his bloody sword and crying out:

"Take care all. Don't come near us yet."

But if he had thought the duel not over he was mistaken, for there lay the once boastful Bragamonte in a pool of blood, his face pale, his eyes glassy, and the Dane remarked grimly:

"One more of the Terrible Seven, and he is not so terrible after all."

Then he turned and went back to his quarters, while the people came and picked up Bragamonte, and carried him to the same hut in which Pepe Gomez was lying partially convalescent.

As for El Rubio Bravo he looked gloomy and depressed as he went back with his friend Brown, and he remarked as soon as they were out of hearing:

"Doctor, this is only the beginning. I never yet killed a man in a duel but I shall have to kill seven before these fellows will let me alone. I am going to leave Tegucigalpa."

"With all my heart," returned the doctor in a tone that showed he meant it. "I've turned my money into gold and diamonds. How's yours?"

"The same. I am an old campaigner and always ready to travel. How many horses have you?"

"One and three mules."

"Let us be off, then. I have four horses and that will carry all we need, including—"

"Including what?"

"Including our wives," was the composed answer of the Dane.

Doctor Charley shrugged his shoulders.

"And what shall we do with them? They can't stand hardship."

"They will come with us if they love us," said the swordmaster obstinately.

Doctor Charley shook his head.

"I shall not ask Pepita to ride off with me on any such wild goose chase. Where do you propose to go to?"

"To Guatemala."

"And suppose Guartiola sends after us?"

"He will not. We shall have enough men to stop pursuit."

"And where will you get them?"

Olaf smiled.

"My dear friend, you do not know that I have had plenty of pupils since I have been here."

"Yes. I do. Lord knows you've made noise enough teaching them. I've heard you shouting for hours at a time."

"Very well. All these men adore me and among them are twenty Indians whom I have taught how to use a lance as they never did before. They have all promised to follow me to the death."

"And you expect—?"

"To take them with me and strike through the forest into the State of Guatemala where I have received offers of a place worth three times as much as this. Is it not worth the experiment?"

They were interrupted by the sound of fire-arms in the plaza.

Doctor Charley jumped up and ran to the window where he watched a moment, then shouted excitedly:

"By Jove, another revolution!"

CHAPTER X.

THE REVOLUTION.

THE two friends hurried to call their servants, arm all hands and saddle up; for in Central American revolutions the rule is, every one for himself, the only point of union being that of opposition to the government.

The whole of Guartiola's army had turned out, to the number of about a hundred men; and a general free fusilade was going on at the opposite side of the plaza.

In a very short time the whole town was aroused and had taken sides, and a man on horseback came tearing across to the quarters of El Rubio Bravo, imploring him to come to the rescue of the President, and "cut down the insolent rebels."

Olaf by that time was all ready, and he mounted his horse and called to the doctor.

As they rode out into the plaza there arose a general shout for "El Rubio Bravo," and the bullets began to patter round him—not very thickly because fire-arms were not plentiful, but enough to show that he was marked by one party or the other. A moment later came a clattering and shouting, as a whole troop of cavalry, armed in all sorts of ways, came galloping into the plaza yelling:

"Viva Don Ramon! Abajo Guartiola! Muerta! Muerta a Guartiola!" [Long live Ramon! Down with Guartiola! Death! Death to Guartiola!]

The cry was caught up till it swelled into a mighty chorus and Doctor Charley observed to Olaf in his sagacious way:

"The jig's up! Guartiola's chances are not worth a rap. We must run for it. Old Ramon's at the head of the move, and we'll be killed if we stay."

Just as he spoke they heard a great shouting and rumbling, and into the plaza rattled two brass guns at full gallop.

"That's Ortega's battery," observed Olaf. "He'll scatter the rebels."

"Wait a bit and see!" quoth Charley.

And lo and behold!

Instead of firing at the rebels Ortega jumped off his horse, unlimbered one gun with his own hands, and sent a round of grape crashing into the ranks of Guartiola's supporters, who incontinently broke and fled, while the whole mob swarmed into the palace and the firing was drowned in the exultant shouts of the victors.

"Now, colonel," quoth the Briton, "take my advice. The quicker we're out of this, the better. They have a pleasant little habit of massacring prisoners here, and we belong to the losing party."

The Dane looked sullenly at the other side of the plaza and ground his teeth.

"I wish my twenty Indians were here instead of on Don Ramon's hacienda," he growled. "I'd like to try one charge on that scum."

"But they not being here, I'm going," quoth the doctor, and he rode off as he spoke.

Olaf hesitated a moment, and then followed his example, for he was all alone save for his three Indian servants, who had already loaded up his baggage and were waiting to depart.

They trotted slowly out of Tegucigalpa on the westward side, and Brown remarked:

"Only six months in this blooming country and one practice broken up already. I wonder

how long they'll let us stay in the next place colonel."

"I don't know and I don't care," said Olaf in a savage way. "All I regret is that I didn't cut my way through them, and carry off Carmelita."

Brown laughed.

"And where should we be now, with a woman in our party? Give the devil his due; these creoles never hurt women. I believe they inherit that much chivalry from the old Conquistadores. Your girl and mine are both safe, and by this time old Guartiola's dead, so he can't marry Carmelita. As for my girl, you've just laid out her intended, Bragamonte; for which, by the-by, I'm very much obliged, old fellow."

They rode quietly on, no man offering to pursue them, and began to ascend the side of the mountains.

The higher they went the cooler it became, till, by the time it was hot, sweltering noon in Tegucigalpa, below them, the air about them was cool and bracing, while over their heads they could see the edge of the snow line, and the condors were wheeling about on a level with their horses' feet.

The view around them was one full of the most picturesque sublimity; for they had come to a ridge whence they could see on one side the waters of the Caribbean sea and on the other the dim distant line of the broad Pacific ocean, while a wilderness of mountain and forest, lake and savanna, spread on either side from sea to sea.

And, saving the town of Tegucigalpa, in all that expanse they could see no sign of human habitation, save that they were on a sort of track marked by mules' feet, and to be traced ahead by the white "blaze" on the trees.

"This is the road to old Guatemala," said the doctor. "It passes to the south of Comayagua and runs into the Lost People Road, further."

Olaf looked surprised.

"The Lost People Road! what's that?"

"Well, it's pretty hard to say. You know the Indians round here are queer people and the whites don't know the language of half of them. It's called Maya."

"So I've heard. Here's Maso, my horse-boy, is a Maya, by-the-by. But what of it?"

"Well, you see, I believe they are a superstitious lot of fellows, you know."

"I know that too."

"And they have a tradition among them that, somewhere in these mountains, there exists a lost city, inhabited by a lot of ancient Mexicans, who ran away when Cortez took the country, found a place where no one can get at them, and are living to-day in just the same style as that in which their ancestors did in the days of Moctezuma."

The Dane looked very much interested.

"I never heard of that before; but it sounds as if it were reasonable. Let us go and find this place."

Brown shook his head.

"No use; no one ever got there and came back alive."

"Perhaps no one ever tried very hard."

"Perhaps not. These Greasers are lazy brutes, not worth licking, and the Indians, if they have ever been there and come back, won't tell a soul. But I've heard of at least two white men who went in search of the Lost City and never were heard of again."

Olaf pulled his long mustache in a meditative manner.

"And where is this Lost City supposed to be?"

"Somewhere beyond old Guatemala, on the road to Chiapas and Tabasco."

"My friend," said Olaf enthusiastically, "let us go there. These Greasers are not Norsemen. Our race goes anywhere and everywhere. We will find the Lost City or die in the attempt."

Brown shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be all a sell, you know?"

"How a sell?"

"Well, you know, the whole country is full of these ruined cities, that some people think are many thousands of years old, while others are just as sure that they are remnants of the same cities that Cortez found, full of Mexicans."

"Well, what of that?"

"Well, you know, this may only be another of them, colonel."

"Another what?"

"Another ruin. You see no white man has ever been there, and it's surrounded by dense forests, but so are Uxmal and Palenque and the other ruins. I'm told old Padre Gil Perez has seen something he thinks is the town on a clear morning from the mountains, but after all it may only be another ruin."

"Ruin or town," returned Olaf obstinately, "I'm going to try and get there."

The doctor made no reply and they rode on along the trail till the blazed line crossed a ridge and plunged downward into a dense sea of dark-green foliage.

They rode on, the atmosphere becoming by slow degrees warmer as they descended till sunset surprised them in the midst of great groves of India-rubber trees with their broad leathery leaves, their trunks half strangled by leaves and vines, while troops of howling monkeys began to make night hideous and the occasional

roar of a jaguar showed them that the South American animals had spread into their vicinity.

It was but a cheerless place to camp, for everything was damp round them and they had no food with them, but they were soon cheered as they rode along by the gleam of a light in the dark forest ahead of them, and coming up to it, discovered the hut of a native India-rubber gatherer who was clipping away at some new troughs for his next day's work.

He was an Indian of the Maya family like most of the laborers in that region; but he understood Spanish and talked it in a broken fashion that was not unpleasing.

His name was Lupo, he said, and he made his living by carrying India-rubber to the coast traders when he wanted money.

"I don't want much, senores. It is only for tobacco and coca, and one trip a year gives me enough of that."

"And have you any neighbors?" asked Olaf.

The Indian smiled. "Listen, senor, and you will hear them."

It was not necessary to listen, for the loud chorus of monkeys, frogs, alligators and other animals from the neighboring swamps, forced itself on the ear all night long.

By day the silence had been oppressive, but the night seemed to be given over to revelry among the animals which swarmed in the forest, and the sharp buzz of millions of mosquitoes, which drove them to the lee of a smoky fire, where they had to sit up all night.

"That is the way, senores. To do my work here we must follow nature and do our sleeping in the daytime, for the night is the same all the year round. If we don't have a visit from the jaguars before morning, I shall be much surprised."

And Lupo was right, for the scent of the horses and mules proved so attractive that the whole party was compelled to turn out before dawn and open fire on a pair of prowling jaguars, one of which was killed and the other sent limping away.

In the dawn they saddled up and proceeded on their journey toward the State of Guatemala.

CHAPTER XL.

DON JOSE.

OUT in the upper valleys of the Cordilleras between the States of Guatemala and Chiapas, one of the provinces of Mexico, a stout and handsome man in the uniform of a Mexican general was riding at the head of a party of some fifty lancers, when he suddenly gave the order for his men to halt as he espied a figure on the ridge that divided him from the low countries.

The party was in the midst of a grove of palms, whose spiky foliage concealed them from view, and the figure above was clearly outlined against the blue sky, so that they could see it to be an armed horseman.

The officer held his horse reined in and watched. Presently another figure came in sight and then another till they had counted six, all mounted and coming down into the valley in which they were.

The officer called up one of his followers.

"Captain Robaldo, you have a glass. Can you see who those people are?"

The captain—a swarthy, handsome fellow—nodded as he offered the glass to his commander.

"I have seen them already, general. They are Yanquis or English and all well armed. I see rifles and revolvers; but only one wears a sword. He is a Rubio like yourself, general."

Indeed the general, though evidently of pure Spanish blood, had fair hair and blue eyes. The senior officer reflected a moment and then said:

"Let the men dismount. These people may be friends after all. In our State any one who is not an enemy is welcome."

The men obeyed orders and tied their horses to the palm trees while the two officers rode out to meet the coming party which had been, when first seen, about two miles off.

They kept among the trees so as not to be seen and finally came out into a pretty little meadow surrounded by forest where they could see the other party advancing.

Captain Robaldo here ventured to say:

"Is it quite prudent to go any further? These people may attempt—"

The general waved his hand.

"They are Americans and I fear nothing. If they were our own countrymen, now, you might talk, Robaldo."

"But we do not know them and they might shoot at us for fun."

"Not they, captain. They see that we are not handling our weapons."

They rode on accordingly and as they came nearer the other party saw that it was headed by two men whose light hair and general appearance showed them to be probably Americans.

One of them was slim and military looking, the other large and burly; but both had pistols out in their hands and looked suspicious.

Presently they came within hailing distance,

when the slim man, who had a long pointed mustache, called out:

"Who are you, gentlemen? Halt, please."

He pointed his pistol and the two Mexicans halted, but neither offered to throw his hand forward while the senior said:

"I am Don Jose Ramirez, late general of cavalry in Chiapas, now a free lance on my way to hunt up recruits for Ortega. This is my aide, Captain Robaldo. To whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"I am Colonel Olaf Svenson, late Instructor at Arms of Honduras, now a free rover and looking for a service. This is my friend, Don Carlos Brown, in the same predicament," was the answer of our friend the swordmaster.

The Mexican general burst out laughing.

"I could have sworn you were, like myself, a soldier of fortune, down on his luck. Come, senor, my party is down to-day, but this is a land of fluctuations. Join forces with me and who knows what we three Rubios may accomplish? I can promise you under my chief as good a place as that you have lost. The pay it is true is only enough for cigars, but then *por Dios, tenemos ongas libres* [we have nails free by heavens] and you do not need to be told what that means."

Olaf smiled.

"Nails free! It is a picturesque phrase, and means, I suppose, that you have plenty of pickings. Who knows, Don Jose, I may accept your offer."

"Hands upon it then," cried the other frankly. "We are cavaliers and we have our arms and horses. Who shall refuse us a forced loan?"

"Who indeed? A forced loan, I suppose, is—"

"The tribute commerce pays to arms. We come to a town full of merchants and they pay for our protection. You understand, the country is full of guerillas and we are the friends of order. It is proper society should pay us, my friend."

"I see."

Olaf could not help smiling at the careless recklessness of the handsome Mexican.

"But come, my friend, my party is in camp over yonder in the valley and it is time to eat. Share my hospitality."

"With pleasure, Don Jose."

They rode along to where the lancers were now bivouacked and dismounted, when a bountiful repast was spread before Olaf and his fellow-traveler, causing the Briton to exclaim:

"I say, colonel, you know, if this is the sort of way the 'out' party fares, the 'ins' must live in clover all the time."

Ramirez asked for a translation of the remark, and laughed heartily.

"This is the country for a soldier of fortune," he said. "Nature and the Indians do the work and we live on the fat of the land. But it is well understood that we must be ready to fight for our lives all the time. That is the drawback."

Dinner over they saddled up and Olaf asked:

"Whither now, Don Jose? This is not the way to Chiapas, but to Guatemala."

"Faith, I hardly know," responded Ramirez. "I have a week in which to roam before we meet my chief and hardly know what to do. Can you suggest any scheme to fill our purses in the mean time, for our party needs money?"

Olaf nodded.

"I have a scheme on which I was bent, but had not enough men to render it safe."

"And what is that?"

"To find the Lost City of the Aztecas."

Ramirez started.

"The Lost City? How did you hear of it? I thought that was a secret among our people."

"I have heard of it."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I know where it is said to be."

The Mexican looked thoughtful for a time.

"Do you know, Don Olaf," he said, "that I have had a dream of that city haunting me for many years and have never had any opportunity till now of realizing it?"

"Indeed?"

"Yes. What do you know what have you ever heard about this Lost City?"

"Simply that up in these mountains, and as near as I can find not far from here, the Indians say there is a hidden city still held by the ancient Aztecs."

"Yes, that is it. But that is not all."

"How not all? What else?"

"Have you not heard of the ransom of the great Moctezuma?"

"No. What is it?"

"It is quite a story. It is said that when the great Cortez took Moctezuma prisoner and before the Mexicans rose for the *Noche Triste* when they drove the Spaniards from the city, the king offered to pay Cortez a great ransom of gold and sent word to all his chiefs to collect it. But the *Noche Triste* came, the treasure never got to Mexico, but was carried away into these mountains. Then came the conquest and the Aztecs were driven out of all their old towns while our race took possession of all."

"I have heard all that."

"True, but not of Guatemozin's sister, Tlaloma."

"No. Who was she?"

"They say she was a princess six feet high and as strong as two common men. Anyway she was the only Aztec who took to the mountains, defied Spain and maintained her freedom."

"But what has she to do—"

"With the Lost City?"

"Yes."

"Simple enough. She founded it."

"Founded it! Then it is a modern place."

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"The tradition goes that it was a sacred place, only inhabited by priests and sacred to the God of War, Quetzalcoatl."

"Quetzal—what a name!"

"Yes; we'll call him the War God, it's much easier. Well, the city was built in the midst of mountains like a fortress with only one narrow entrance so that the temple could be defended by twenty men. It was a fitting temple for a War God."

"But Tlahoma—what of her?"

"I'm coming to that. The time came at last when Tlahoma—her band reduced to less than a thousand faithful warriors, was hunted into the mountains and took refuge in the War God's temple. She found the land around it so fair that she made it into a city and from it planned numerous expeditions into Mexico, all of which succeeded. Therefore in the Lost City, which was once nothing but a temple, are collected all the treasures of Moctezuma's ransom and all the fruits of Tlahoma's raids."

"But what became of her?"

"She married the chief priest of the War God, it is said, and her descendants rule there to this day. But since her death they have never come down out of the mountains. That's all."

"But how did you learn all this?"

"Merely by legend. You know our Indians are very fond of telling legends. It may all be false, but if it be true—"

He paused doubtfully.

"Well, if it be true?"

"Why, then, there must be enough gold and silver in the Lost City to make us all as rich as Cortez."

Olaf nodded.

"Then why not go and try for it?"

"Why not? Well, you see there are only a hundred and six of us."

"And how many men had Cortez, when he made war on an empire?"

Ramirez shrugged his shoulders.

"You are right. He had only five hundred and fifty, and seventy muskets, with sixteen horses."

"Yet with those he gave Spain an empire. We only seek to find a city and we have a hundred horses, with rifles and revolvers. Your men have their fire-arms; is it not so?"

"They have carbines, swords and lances, no pistols. We depend on the lance most."

"The lance? I do not think much of that for a weapon, general."

Ramirez flushed up in a moment. It was clear that Olaf had touched him on a sore spot.

"Not trust the lance! Good heavens, man, it is the queen of *armas blancas* (steel weapons), and our national arm. My men could do nothing without the lance. Why, I could beat any swordsman living with my lance."

Olaf smiled provokingly.

"Any swordsman living is quite a challenge. You may not know I am a master of the sword."

"Master or no master, I can run you through," cried the Mexican, hotly, and as he spoke he caught up his lance, ran to his horse and vaulted on without the aid of the stirrups.

Then he wheeled and galloped off a hundred yards, waved his lance and cried:

"Come on, Don Olaf, or else own the lance is the queen of all weapons."

His tone was gay and courteous as might have become a knight of old, challenging for a tournament.

Olaf smiled and said to himself:

"That is a man after my own heart. He is a born cavalier, but he does not know me."

He mounted his own fiery little horse with a deliberation in strong contrast to the fiery haste of the Mexican, drew his sword and galloped to meet Ramirez.

The Mexican general rushed in with headlong haste, his lance couched and quivering, while the Dane kept his own horse in a hand-gallop. A moment later they came together, and the Mexican's horse was seen to sway wide of Olaf's body, while the swordmaster turned in toward Ramirez, closed with him, and in a moment later emerged from the fray with Ramirez's hat and lance in his hand.

For a moment the Mexican seemed inclined to be furious, but as he looked at the other, calm and smiling, he exclaimed:

"It is fair; you have beaten me, but by the gods, you are the only man in the world who can do it."

Olaf rode up to him and handed him his hat and lance.

"You play the lance well, but I know a trick in that weapon worth more than yours. We will practice it. In the mean time I will admit that the lance is a good weapon in good hands, and I intend to use one before I leave this coun-

try. And now which way shall we go, Don Jose?"

"Yonder. That is the way to the Lost City."

He pointed to the ridge over which Olaf had come when he entered the valley.

CHAPTER XII.

PADRE MIGUEL

PADRE MIGUEL was the sole remains of the once powerful and flourishing Mission of San Miguel de Guatemala in the Cordilleras. He had been reared there from the time he was a baby, and had never known who was his mother. He had known the Mission in the old times of the Spanish occupation, when it received tithes from a large space of country below, and had a good two hundred monks when he was an acolyte, and he had seen it dwindle to a hundred when he was a deacon, and sink to fifty after he had become a full priest.

After the numerous revolutions that shook the land round them, varied by earthquakes and hurricanes, Padre Miguel found his head growing white, with only two old monks to keep him company, and finally they dropped off.

Then Padre Miguel was left all alone in the huge, ruinous building, cracked by the innumerable earthquakes but still fairly habitable, surrounded by a garden full of every variety of fruits, with two Indian servants for his sole flock.

Nevertheless, he was too old to change, and he had lived there ever since, with plenty to eat and drink, and performing mass as regularly in the Mission chapel as if he had been in a city full of people.

Padre Miguel in his black cassock and huge hat, sat at the door of the Mission and looked over as fair a picture as ever gladdened the eye of man.

Before him, about three miles off across a broad and lovely valley, rose the foot-hills of a sea of mountains, and from where he was he could see the blue line of the Pacific over the top of another sea of woods. Thirty or forty miles off among the mountains rose a trio of lofty peaks crowned with snow, and it was at these that the old monk was gazing wistfully when he heard the clatter of hoofs, and saw a cavalcade of lancers coming toward the Mission.

Padre Miguel was all in a flutter. Such a sight had not been seen in San Miguel for fifty years. He remembered once in the old Spanish times having been visited by a party of "patriots," but the Mission was too lonely ever since to attract any one.

He saw at the head of them all, three men with fair hair and blue eyes.

One was dressed in the showy uniform of a Mexican general, with a gold-laced cocked hat; the second was likewise in uniform, but of a plainer cut; the third wore white clothes and a puggaree hat, such as the padre had never seen before.

Behind them rode at least a hundred men in velveteen jackets and bell-bottomed trowsers, with broad, shiny hats on their heads, brass-sheathed sabers at their sides, carbines strapped to their saddles and long lances in their hands.

Padre Miguel got up, trembling.

"Good-day, gentlemen. What are you pleased to want to-day. We have no money left."

The Mexican general laughed.

"We want none, father. Nothing but your blessing and permission to halt and pick a little of your fruit for my men."

"Certainly, certainly, my son. The blessing of the church is the right of her sons."

The Mexican dismounted and knelt down in the most respectful manner before the priest who extended his tremulous hands over his head with a fervent benediction.

Then the whole party got off their horses and spread about the Mission while the officers asked the good padre if he would not honor them by taking dinner with them, as they had killed enough game in the forest to supply all, and it would only spoil if kept.

The padre was not loth, and the fires were soon lighted, before which sundry legs of pecary, anteater, monkey and other savory but peculiar game were roasting, while the chiefs entered into conversation with the old man, asking numerous questions.

"You seem pretty lonely here, padre?"

"Pretty lonely. Yes, my son. But few people come by here, except those that are running from one State to another, in these terrible times of revolution. Ah, how different to the peace and quiet when Our Mother Spain ruled us!"

"Aha! Padre, you remember the Spanish colonial times, then?"

"Yes, my son, yes. Don't tell any one, but I wish they were back. The church had her rights and respect, then. Now—you see how her Missions are decayed."

"Any travelers passed lately?"

"Last week, my son; a small party with two ladies in it. Heaven help them."

"Ladies! here!"

It was Olaf who spoke.

"You may well wonder, my son. Yes; it was true, indeed. They were ladies."

"Where from, father?"

"They came from Tegucigalpa, on account of the revolution there. They belonged to the party that was beaten. One of them belonged to a Cuban merchant called Ximenes—"

"Ximenes! Dios!"

"What is the matter, my son?"

"Nothing, father. Go on."

"The other was called Garcia. They were with their fathers and had five mules loaded with gold, all their fortunes, going to Mexico."

Olaf turned to Charley Brown.

"You hear that?" he said in English.

"Of course I do. I'm not such a blooming idiot, I can't understand Spanish if I can't speak it. I told you our girls were safe."

"But how came they here?"

"Blest if I know. S'pose Old Wickedness got the best of them after all, and they had to pull up stakes and run."

"Then we shall find them in Mexico."

"Perhaps," said Charley doubtfully.

"Why not?"

"Because Mexico's as full of guerrillas and other robbers as an egg's full of meat. Five mules loaded with gold! That's enough to tempt a saint. And no escort I suppose."

"Ask the old man."

"Padre," said Olaf, turning to the old priest, "did these travelers have any soldiers with them when they passed?"

"Not one, my son. There were two old men and three Indian peons."

"Then they're gone up sure," muttered the young doctor.

"Which road were they to take, father?"

The old man reflected.

"I think, my son, if I remember right, they were to go by the Lost City road to Chiapas, because no one passes that way, on account of the legends of ghosts at night. I recommended it to them as safest for them. If there are ghosts on the road, at least there are no robbers, and five mule-loads of gold is a great temptation."

Olaf nodded to Brown, well pleased.

"We are in luck. We shall overtake them."

Here Ramirez, to whom their questions were enigmatical, broke in:

"Do you know this party, gentlemen?"

Olaf made him a sign to restrain his questions for the present and answered:

"Yes, they are friends of ours. We may save them from danger before they reach Mexico."

Then Don Jose called them to dinner and over the savory fumes of roast monkey—than which is no better eating, it is said—they entered into further conversation with the old priest who had lived all his life in that spot.

"You have seen a good deal of the Indians, padre, is it not so?"

"I was brought up among them, my son, and I talk all their dialects."

"How many are there, father?"

"There are enumerated one hundred and thirty-seven varieties more or less distinct, of the Maya stock," began the old man who was evidently riding a hobby. "I devoted much time and attention to the subject, because I had nothing else to do, and I am satisfied that the Maya is the original language of the Aztec nation that was conquered by the great Cortez."

"And have you ever heard from them of the Lost City, father?"

The padre's voice sunk to a low impressive key as he said solemnly:

"My sons, I have seen the Lost City."

Olaf started up full of excitement.

"You! Why I thought no white man had ever been there and come back alive."

"I did not go there my son. God forbid. I should not be alive now had I done so. But I have seen it with these two eyes when they were many years younger and better than they are now, and I shall never forget the sight."

His hearers, much interested, began to ask questions again.

"When was it? How was it? What did you see? Is it a ruin? Does it have any people in it?"

"I saw it when I was a young novice, before I took even deacon's orders. I went on a long tramp among the mountains in my novitiate to meditate on holy things with no one to make my thoughts wander. I wandered on till I lost my way in the forest and among the passes."

"Could you find the way again?" asked Don Jose eagerly.

"I could, my son. I took precautions as you shall hear to mark the trail as I came back, and I have dreamed ever since of some day going back there. But it is all over now. I am an old man and I shall never see with my living eyes that wondrous city again."

He fell into a fit of musing again from which he was wakened by Brown asking:

"Was it a ruin, father?"

The English doctor blushed all over at his first attempt at connected Spanish, and the padre answered absently:

"No, no, it is no ruin. It is a real city, with real people; but such a city, such a people I never saw. Ah, senores, some have said that

the conquistadores were cruel, that they murdered innocent Aztecs. I tell you if they were all like these people Cortez was a scourge sent from God to punish them for their sins."

Now perfectly burning with curiosity Olaf cried out:

"For Heaven's sake, padre, tell us the story. How did you come on them and what did you see?"

The old monk looked at him doubtfully.

"You know I am not certain if I saw them, senor," he said quietly.

"Not certain? What do you mean?"

"I mean that it is all so strange, so very strange, that I have often wondered since if it were not all a dream."

"Well, dream or reality, tell us. You say you lost your way in the mountains. How was it?"

"I lost my way in the forest, not in the mountains. It was in the mountains I found it again, senores. But I may as well begin at the beginning and tell you all about it."

The padre took a pinch of snuff—his only vice—and began his story.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PADRE'S STORY.

"You know, senores, even if you are not Catholics, that we Catholics frequently make what we call retreats."

Don Jose nodded.

"This would be a nice place to make one."

"Very true, senor. Whenever you wish to come, you shall be welcome."

Olaf interrupted him.

"But I do not know what is a retreat."

"It is a season of retirement from the world, to fast and pray, senor, and good Catholics make it once a year. Well, it was my turn to make a retreat in my novitiate, and I asked the Father Superior's permission to make mine in the mountains toward the Lost City, because it was said that there were terrible spirits in that direction, and I wished to do battle with them for the church. Alas, I saw none, unless you call human beings such. Well, I went there with the father's advice, and I was so much wrapped up in my thoughts that I went three days and nights without food, and on the fourth day found myself in a strange place, where I had never been before."

"What was it like?"

"It was an open forest, without underwood, with tall cascarilla trees at the foot of a rock, which I could see towering up so straight that it looked like a wall. Down the middle of it came a little stream of water, as cold as ice, and this had worn a passage into the rock, up which I climbed."

"Were you strong enough to climb, after three days' fast?"

"Three days is nothing, my son. I have fasted ten at a time, and have seen visions."

"Well, go on."

"I will admit that I was very hungry, my son; but there was nothing to eat, so I had to go on, after drinking of that beautiful water. It seemed to give me immediate strength, and I went up the bed of the stream, which led me on finally into a sort of tunnel or cave, down which the stream cut its way, and finally brought me out on a table land of rock, in the midst of which the stream had made a pool, coming from the side of a vast snow-crowned mountain, out of which shot the spur of rock on which I stood. On that side there was nothing but the huge mountain and the sky above, but on the other side I saw—"

"What? the Lost City?" cried Olaf eagerly.

"No, my son," said Padre Miguel, smiling. "Not the Lost City, but this Mission."

"Then if you saw the Mission from there, we can see the rock from here," said Brown, with British logic and common sense.

"Certainly, my son, yonder it is. I cannot see it, but your eyes are young. I know the direction."

He pointed off to the east across the sea of dark forest under his feet—for the Mission was built on a lofty table land—to where a chain of snow-capped mountains rose up, about forty miles off.

"Can you see a white spur of rock over the forest at the foot of the mountains, senores, with a stream of water that sparkles, if the sun is in the right quarter?"

"I see it," quoth Ramirez.

"So do I," said Brown.

Olaf deliberately leveled a strong field-glass at it, before he would declare:

"I too. Yes, there is the stream and the pool of which you spoke. Yes, and there is a cavern beyond, out of which the stream runs."

"That is the place, and there I found myself. Well, you may be sure by that time I began to wish I had not made my retreat so very far, and to think about something to eat, if only some berries."

"Very natural, padre."

"Yes, senores, the flesh is weak with the best of intentions; and though I had been so busy in my thoughts I had forgotten all about my hunger, the moment I remembered my hunger I forgot my prayers. I actually wished I had

a gun to shoot something; but I had not so much as a knife, nothing but my nails."

"Well, what did you do, padre?"

"I wandered along the foot of the mountain on that table rock, looking for some wild bananas or pineapples or something; but of course found none, and the consequence was that I went on round the shoulder of the mountain and came into a side valley, where I discovered, to my great joy, a little pool of water, full of tortoises and frogs."

"And did you eat them?"

"Indeed I did, senores."

"But how did you kill and cook them?"

"There were plenty of sharp flints lying round, and you know, senores, we people are half Indians round here. We know how to make and use flint knives. As for fire, I knew how to make that too; for there was plenty of dry moss on the rocks, and flints to strike fire with. In short I cooked and ate a good-sized tortoise, and then felt so much ashamed of myself that I prayed to be forgiven, and resolved to do penance for my sins by fasting for a week longer, and wandering out of sight of any place where I could get help. I tell you I felt strong to resist the devil and all his imps, at that time of my life."

Olaf interrupted him here.

"Are we getting near the Lost City yet?"

"All in good time, my son; I did not see it for three days after that."

Olaf groaned with impatience.

Brown shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

Ramirez lighted a cigarette.

The padre placidly proceeded:

"I skirted that mountain and got to the next, then went on to a pass between two others, and finally found myself surrounded with hills of all sorts, and once more completely lost."

"Only there was this difference.

"In the forest I did not know how I got there, but in the mountaints I was able to go back the way I had come; retracing my course by the landmarks."

"How long before you found you were lost?" asked Olaf abruptly.

"Three days, senor."

"Thank God!"

"Why, senor?"

"Because we are so much nearer to the Lost City, father."

The old priest smiled.

"Don't be impatient, my son. It was noon of the third day that I again began to feel hunger, and determined not to give way to it. I went recklessly on till I came to the other side of the mountains, where I saw below me a green valley of surpassing and wonderful richness, evidently the property of men; for I could see gardens and herds of sheep, cattle and horses, grazing on a level savanna in the midst of palm-groves. I was so much disgusted at the sight—for I thought I had come into the State of Honduras by mistake—that I turned round, re-entered the pass I had left, and sunk down to rest under a rock, where I speedily fell asleep."

"Well, padre," said Olaf, resignedly, "I suppose you have about as little curiosity as any man. I should not have gone to sleep in your place."

"But I did. It is true, my son. I slept till the middle of the night, and dreamed a very strange dream. I thought that I had gone on into the valley and found in its midst the Lost City of the Aztecs, crowned with a huge teocalli to the War God, to whom they were offering human victims. I was so much impressed by the dream that I woke in a profuse sweat, and, as I did so, heard in good earnest the very drums and cymbals I had heard in my dream from the priests of the War God. They were all round me, and seemed to echo from every rock, but I could see nothing. I thought it was the work of the evil one, so I fell on my knees and prayed most heartily to be spared. It was then quite dark."

"Just then a bright light shone up the pass, and I saw, coming toward me, a crowd of men in gorgeous feather dresses, carrying long spears, and bearing in their midst a white man, stripped and crowned with flowers, whom they were leading along with ropes covered, as if in grim mockery, with garlands of flowers."

"I was frightened to death, and shrunk back into my dark hole in the rock, and so the great rabble passed me, singing in the Maya tongue a hymn to the god Quetzalcoatl."

"I saw too well what it was. In one single moment it flashed on me. These were the men of the Lost City, in the same state as Cortez had found them, centuries ago, and they had by some means captured a white man and were leading him as a victim to the altar."

"He was a young man, fair and handsome, a Rubio like you, and I heard him praying to himself in some foreign language as he walked along, the Aztecs yelling and singing round him."

"They never saw me, but passed on to the valley I had seen, when I followed them, as if compelled by a horrible fascination. They went on, and I watched them in the dark night, like a trail of fire, for they all carried torches, going along the side of the mountain."

"Below me the valley seemed to be all ablaze with lights, and as I went on I saw that a tall white teocalli was erected at the end of the valley, with a huge bonfire blazing on its summit, around which the priests of the War God were dancing and singing, while processions with torches were winding to and fro beneath."

"I could see the whole city, and a grand one it was, with white palaces and houses, all surrounded by trees and gardens, a lake in the valley covered with boats, and a stream running out to the lower end."

"I went as far as I dared, and found that the valley was surrounded by perpendicular walls, except in one place, where there was a narrow road down which the procession was passing."

"Then I hid in some bushes and watched."

"I was not eight hundred feet from the summit of the great teocalli and could see it plainly, for my eyes were very good in those days."

"I saw the procession with the white victim go down into the valley and up the side of the teocalli; I saw them lay the victim on the great black stone of sacrifice, just as we read about in the days of Cortez; and I saw them finally cut out his heart with two fearful gashes, and hold it up to the War God."

"Then, I own, senores, that my senses seemed to give way. I felt as if I were going mad, and I leaped up and fled like a deer."

"I don't even know how long I fled or where I was; but when I came to my senses I found myself by the little pool with the turtles, cutting one of them apart and devouring it raw like a wild beast."

The old man shuddered and hid his face.

"Don't be so shocked," observed Don Jose, soothingly. "You were excusable. I should have done the same in your place."

"I suppose so, senor, but you are not a priest sworn to mortify the flesh. I was shocked and terrified beyond measure, added to which I was assailed by the most horrible pains."

"No wonder, eating raw flesh after a five or six days' fast."

"I do not know how long it was, senor, but I know I fell sick by that pool and very nearly died; and when I finally got back to the convent they had given me up as being killed by jaguars."

He stopped as if he had finished, and Olaf asked, with some disappointment:

"Is that all, padre?"

"That is all, my son. I have never seen the Lost City since."

CHAPTER XIV.

SETTING OUT.

"BUT surely you have spoken of it to others," said Don Jose, earnestly. "Why they have even a road which they call the Lost City road somewhere here."

"It is true, my son; they have such a road, but it is nowhere near the Lost City, though I am inclined to think that the people of the Lost City sometimes go out in raids on that road."

"What makes you think so?"

"From the fact of their having a white man for their captive when I saw them. Of course I told my superior of my adventure, and he cautioned me never to speak of it, for he attributed it to a dream brought on by extreme hunger, and doubted my sanity at the time. In fact, I hardly know to-day if I did not dream it all."

"Did you ever hear of any traveler being missed about that time?" asked Brown, thoughtfully.

The padre sighed deeply.

"Yes, my son; and that is one of my reasons for believing I did not dream."

"How? Why?"

"There was a party of engineers making a survey at the time, and they were all found dead on the Lost City road. And a strange and terrible peculiarity of their death was that every one seemed to have had his heart cut out of his body."

"That settles it," observed Olaf, rising; "and it settles another thing. These wretches are the same that Cortez found, and it is our place to drive them from the face of the earth. It is too late in the world's history for human sacrifices, padre."

Padre Miguel shook his head gravely.

"My son, beware of passion. It is true that these men are wicked devils, but it is not for us to punish them. I have thought over that."

"But you say they infest the Lost City road, and make traveling unsafe there. Why even now there are two ladies there. Suppose these fiends should attack them?"

The possibility so excited the Dane that he paced up and down the room with his hands in his hair.

Padre Miguel spoke as calmly as ever.

"I think there is no danger, my son."

"Why not?"

"Because in all the seventy years of my life I have never heard of but two parties being killed on the Lost City road."

"And what were those?"

"One was the surveying party of which I have spoken, the other a French naturalist, who went up into the mountains on that road."

"And what do you infer from that?"

"Simply this: that the people of the Lost City keep a watch over that road from some unseen post, but that they are only bent on preserving the secret of their own existence."

"I don't understand you."

"It is easy enough, my son. If they kept the road in turmoil all the time it would attract attention to it."

"I see that of course."

"But if they find any person making a long stay on the road and trying to penetrate into the country where they are hidden, they fear an attempt on their liberty, and in that case they always kill every soul of the party coming."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes. Those that are not found dead with their hearts cut out disappear. No one ever escaped from them only wounded."

"Yet the legend has spread."

"True; but that is all on account of the Indians, some of whom have visited the town, and all of whom are friendly to it."

"How comes that, father?"

"Simple enough, my son. These Indians know they come of a conquered race and cherish dreams of some day recovering their independence. And more than that: they hope to regain it by means of the people of this very Lost City, whom they respect and admire. Therefore you may lay it down as an axiom that none of our Indians will ever betray the secret of the Lost City and that its people will always have scores of spies on our side ready to tell them of any effort to discover their whereabouts."

"Do any of them know that you have seen the city, padre?"

"No, my son. I did not dare to speak of it for many years, and it was not till the death of the Father Superior released me from my promise that I mentioned it by chance to the French naturalist of whom I spoke. Poor fellow! it was probably the cause of his death. If the Indians about here knew that I had seen with my own eyes the Lost City, I think they would kill me, and I am sorry I told you. It was only the joy of seeing you after so long a period of loneliness, I suppose, that opened my heart to you, but I shall never cease to regret it if it be the cause of your death."

Olaf and Don Jose smiled with some contempt.

"The Indian does not live that can kill a Goth of the ancient blood," said Ramirez with all the pride of a Spaniard. "Here are we three Rubios, all of the same stock, the old Goths that destroyed the Roman Empire. One branch settled in Scandinavia and called it Gothland, another in Spain, another in Angle land, and here we are all three, the conquering races of the earth."

Padre Miguel stared. He had never heard this branch of ethnography discussed before.

"Whatever you may be, senores," he observed, "I would not advise you to try to go to the Lost City. I was there in the night by an accident not likely to happen again, but I saw enough to convince me that none but a powerful army could penetrate there."

"Why? How?"

"The people are numerous and well-armed, and we know from all past and present history that they are as brave as lions in battle. See what trouble they gave Cortez."

"But he beat them with his guns. They have no artillery or gunpowder."

"How do you know that, senores?"

The padre looked very wise as he said this.

Don Jose laughed.

"Oh, come, padre, you don't think they have."

"Why not, senores? Our Indians can shoot and do shoot, and some of them make guns and trabucos. Why not these men? They are not slow to learn, I can tell you."

"But you saw no firearms among them, did you?"

"No, senor, nothing but spears. But I saw they had horses, cattle and sheep, all of which they must have taken from the whites in former times. It is reasonable to suppose that they must know about our weapons, and equally reasonable to suppose that they have copied them to some extent, knowing the terrible advantage they gave Cortez in his struggle with their ancestors."

Olaf thought a moment, and then burst out:

"Don Jose, if you'll go, I'll follow. I am resolved to see this Lost City before I die, if I am in getting there."

They got up from table and took their leave of the old monk, after receiving from him full directions about the Lost City road which went on the other side of the mountains from that on which the padre himself had ascended on his famous "retreat."

The Dane himself was sorely tempted to try the regular track, taking his chance of stumbling on the outlying post of the mysterious people, but Brown, with his stolid British sagacity, observed:

"And if you do, that's just what the beggars want, colonel. They don't believe it possible for any one to get up on this side, or else Padre Miguel would have run on some of them in his little trip."

Don Jose backed Brown in this opinion, but Olaf persisted, and finally gave his reasons.

"If we ride fast we are likely to overtake the party that has gone on ahead with five mules loaded with treasure and with two ladies who are the affianced, respectively, of the doctor and myself. We may save their lives, for if these fiends come down on them they will kill the whole party and very possibly carry off the girls to offer as a sacrifice to some god who likes young virgins cut up before him."

"In that case," said Don Jose, "we shall be better able to rescue them if they be taken by coming on the captors by surprise. I am still in favor of trying the padre's route."

And after some discussion it was so agreed.

Padre Miguel told them that the spot where the English surveying party and the French naturalist had been killed was at least a hundred and fifty miles off by a long circuit, while the Lost City could not be more than seventy in a straight line from the Mission.

"And you will be able to get there long before the slow-traveling mules of that party get to the dangerous place, senores. Therefore, God speed you and fare you well."

The old man stood waving his hat as they rode away and watched them down into the forests of the lowlands.

When he hobbled back to his arm-chair he said to himself mournfully:

"I shall never see them again. And they are so young and brave-looking too! It is a pity!"

Meantime the party of lancers, in all their glory of glittering steel and brass, with their spirited and well-shaped little horses, rode down the slope from the Mission, and found themselves on broad lonely savannas that had not known a scythe for fifty years, and yet stood out green and waving with luxuriant crops of wild wheat and barley, remnants of what had once been the farm of the Mission.

They traveled on till the sun was low in the sky, when they went into camp at the edge of a dense forest, whose tangled vines and undergrowth proclaimed the near vicinity of a swamp.

"To-morrow, if we keep our course right, we shall reach the padre's rock," said Don Jose.

"After that, our real work begins."

CHAPTER XV.

THE FUGITIVES.

OUT on a lonely bridle-path, that wound to and fro among gigantic trees, faintly indicated by a series of white "blazes" on the tall trunks, full of mud-holes and pools of water, a small caravan of loaded mules was stringing wearily forward on the road to Chiapas, under the shadows of the grand Cordilleras.

Down in the forest one could not see far in any direction, but whenever it opened into a glade, there overhead towered the silent, solemn mountains crowned with snow.

There were about twenty mules in the party, of which only six were ridden, the rest plodding sullenly along after an old white mare with a bell round her neck trotting at the head of the caravan and known as the *madrina*—little mother.

Of the ridden mules, two were mounted by old men dressed as rich Spanish merchants or rancheros; two carried armed servants and two bore ladies.

Three Indian muleteers trudged along in the mud beside the mules, and the whole party looked weary and haggard.

"If we only get to Chiapas safe, I shall not mind the privations, Don Ramon," said old Ximenes, with a sigh; "but I fear very much we shall not get there without meeting some *guerrilleros*. Padre Miguel said that they—"

"For the love of Heaven, Don Carlos, don't let us anticipate trouble," interrupted Don Ramon irritably. "It's bad enough to know we have failed and to see Ortega plucking the fruit we ripened, without imagining all sorts of evil before it comes."

Don Carlos Ximenes groaned.

"I have all the savings of my life on those mules and you tell me not to be anxious."

"Anxiety won't help us. We are in the hands of Providence, my friend," retorted Don Ramon. "Do you suppose I feel very jolly in my turn? But Padre Miguel says that we are in no danger on this road. The only men ever seen on it are the Gomez brothers, and they have not been out this year."

"All the more reason for them to be out now," answered Ximenes, obstinately. "I tell you, Don Ramon, I shall not be easy till I am safe inside the gates of the city."

"And that is the very place where we may be in most danger, Don Carlos."

"Why, my friend?"

"Because I hear that they have a change of government there also."

"What! Another revolution? Dios! why did I not stay in Cuba? There was not so much money there, but it was safe, at least."

"That is your affair."

"I know it. But who is in Chiapas now?"

"A namesake of the man who cheated me out of the presidency of Honduras, General Ortega. I hear he is levying forced loans to make an effort against the central power in Mexico. He

has a dashing scamp for a lieutenant called Ramirez, who is said to be out even now scouring the country."

"Heaven grant we do not meet him," groaned Ximenes, in great tribulation. "Oh my mules! To think I should have—"

"Hush! no need of telling our secrets, Don Carlos. It is enough we know the amount of our savings, without telling the servants."

Don Ramon looked round cautiously, and then went on in a low voice:

"I don't know but we might do well if we met Ramirez."

"Why, my friend?"

"Because he is said to be a good fellow, who will listen to reason."

"To reason? How?"

"I mean that it will be better to give him half our savings if he will convoy us to Vera Cruz, than to lose all to some band of guerrilleros, who would cut our throats and carry off our daughters into the bargain."

Don Carlos turned pale, and trembled.

"Is that possible, Don Ramon?"

"It is what the Gomez brothers did to a friend of mine only three years ago."

Don Carlos made no answer, but rode on, looking nervously to right and left.

Presently the ground began to rise, and they came to a very pretty little savanna, where the mules, tired and hungry, refused to proceed further, and began to lie down. When a loaded mule lies down it is a sign that he is determined to have rest, and the muleteers suggested that this was a good place to go into camp till the evening, and let the beasts feed.

The two old men, though loth to halt, were persuaded, and in a few minutes the animals were unsaddled and the little party began to eat what dinner they had, with the foot of the mountain a few hundred yards off.

Pedrillo, the vaquero, who was one of the armed attendants, sat smoking his pipe after dinner, and looking up at the grim face of the mountain so long that Don Ramon asked him:

"What do you see, Pedrillo?"

The old Indian started as if ashamed.

"Nothing, master, nothing."

He moved away to another spot, but his master observed him pretty soon after in the same reflective pose, looking up.

He said nothing, but watched him till he found that the vaquero's gaze was fixed on a ridge of rocks about a thousand feet above, looking like a natural fort or at least a breastwork.

Don Ramon's eyes were not very good, so he went to his saddle-bags and brought out a double glass, with which he examined the breast-work.

He thought he detected a movement above it, and presently was convinced that he did so, by seeing several plumed heads moving about and evidently watching them as they lay below.

Don Ramon, usually cool and impassive, uttered a slight cry of alarm, and as he took the glass from his eye, became conscious that Pedrillo had seen him.

The vaquero's face wore a decided look of alarm, and he rose up and came to the side of his master, to whom he whispered:

"Show no signs, master, or we are lost. I wish the mules were saddled."

"Who are those people above, Pedrillo?" asked the Don gravely. "Do you know?"

Pedrillo turned away his eyes.

"You have been a good master. Don't make me lie. Let us saddle and pack and be off."

Convinced that some danger existed which Pedrillo would not divulge, the Don, his nerves in a sad tremor, gave the order to catch the mules and leave the place at once, an order quickly obeyed, so far as catching the mules was concerned.

But when it came to saddling up, the case was different, for the mules did not like the idea of leaving so fine a pasture, and they began to roll and kick and behave as only mules can.

Don Ramon, from under the shelter of a tree, furtively watched the rocks above, and saw a man come out openly and signal to some one who seemed to be down in the forest behind them.

Now seriously alarmed, he hurried on the packing operation, and had almost succeeded—thanks to liberal beating—when the whole party was appalled by a tremendous yell that seemed to come from the forest all round them, and the next moment more than a hundred men poured into the savanna, some on horseback, some afoot.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CAPTURE.

THE effect produced by the appearance of these men was immediate and terrifying.

The five Indians of the party instantly let fall their weapons and occupations and stood with their arms folded and heads bowed, as if awaiting death.

The two girls, who had been sleeping in the shade of a tree, sprung up, screaming, and ran to their fathers, while the old men, with bands that trembled violently, shielded them in their arms and waited their fate.

Of the oncoming men none of the party—at least the whites—had ever seen their like.

That they were Indians their dark faces told, but they were by no means the naked, squalid Indian brutalized by three centuries of slavery.

These men were all dressed in the most gorgeous raiment of feather work and wore cotton-padded armor, while their heads were covered with wooden helmets of strange device in imitation of the heads of jaguars, wolves or bears.

They carried copper-tipped spears, and long, wooden swords set with sharp flints, such as had not been seen since the days of the conquest of Mexico.

They came running in with frightful cries and began to question the Indian servants in the Maya tongue, of which Don Ramon understood a little, Don Carlos, nothing.

"Who are these men, and why are they here?" asked a horseman, who rode bare-backed on a black horse, and seemed to be the chief.

"They are travelers, mighty chief, going to the City of Chiapas," replied Pedrillo.

"Why are they spying on us? Do they know who we are?" pursued the chief, fiercely.

"No, mighty chief."

"What have they on those mules?"

"Nothing but merchandise, not worth taking."

"You lie, slave of the white man."

"Yes, mighty chief. As you please."

"They have gold stolen from our land. I see it in those little bags. The men of Iximaya are not blind. The gold is ours."

"Yes, mighty chief."

"You are one of our race. Why do you serve the white devils?"

"Because my father did before me."

"That is no reason. I am Quahotl, the son of a man who was a slave, but he slew his master and fled to Iximaya."

Pedrillo made no answer, and the chief called out to his men:

"Drive the beasts off up the mountain. They have gold in their loads. Kill the old men where they stand, and take the girls up to the city to be offered to the Mother of the Gods. Stop!"

He turned to Pedrillo.

"Are they married, these women?"

"No. They are virgins."

"Take them away then."

The strange warriors were already raising their spears to kill the two old men when Pedrillo ventured to speak.

"Mighty chief, spare the old men and make us slaves. It is better than to kill them, and we will go with you then."

Quahotl smiled as one well pleased. He was a handsome young chief and sat his black horse like a centaur.

"Be it so," he said. "Take them all away. Who knows. The priests may like them, even if they are too tough to be eaten."

In a moment the two old men were torn from their children and fastened on mules while the girls, too frightened now even to scream, were forced away and taken to a couple of stalwart warriors who put them before them on their horses and then set off at a rapid pace up the mountain side.

They did not seem to mind tiring out their animals, perhaps because these last were so fresh, but tore away at full speed till they gained the rocky breastwork where they rested for awhile.

Then Don Ramon saw that the place was indeed a natural fortification but much improved internally by art.

A shelf of rock jutted out from the mountain-side in such a way as to form a sort of parapet inclosing a space of twenty or thirty acres, and then came a sheer wall of rock full of deep cracks and crevices blackened with smoke below.

Behind that parapet from below a thousand men might have lain hidden, and the smoke of their camp-fires be all swallowed up in the bowels of the mountain.

By night any glare of fire would be equally hidden, for every blaze was evidently built deep in a cavern.

And from the parapet what a view was commanded, for a space of a good hundred miles or more to the north and west, the white towers of the cathedral at Chipas in plain sight, and miles of dark forest up to the blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico!

Even Don Carlos Ximenes in his miserable plight could not restrain a cry of wonder and admiration at the view, and Quahotl said to Pedrillo:

"Tell the old white thief that my ancestors once owned that country till his fathers came and robbed them of it, but that the men of the city of Iximaya will yet take it back again."

Pedrillo gave the message in Spanish and Don Carlos said, piteously:

"Please tell the gentleman, Pedrillo, that I am not a Mexican, but from Cuba. Surely he has no quarrel with me. What have I done?"

Pedrillo grinned a little sarcastically.

"You'll find that no defense with the men of the Lost City of Iximaya. They believe that the blood of white men is the sweetest of all to the gods of Iximaya. But be easy. I have saved your life for the present and who knows what may happen?"

"You don't care," groaned Ximenes. "Why don't they threaten to kill you?"

"Because I am one of them though I am fool enough to save a Spaniard's life who gives me no thanks for it," growled the vaquero.

Then Don Carlos began to be afraid and to implore the peon.

"Dear Pedrillo, sweet Pedrillo, don't be angry. Get us out of this scrape and I'll make you a rich man for life."

"You'll have naught to do with if you get out alive," quoth Pedrillo dryly. "No white man ever escaped from Iximaya."

Then they heard the sharp tones of Quahotl calling out:

"Silence the white thief. Cut his tongue out if he says another word."

You may be sure that after that, for Pedrillo took a malicious pleasure in putting the command into Spanish, Don Carlos Ximenes kept very still.

The whole of the little plateau was strewed with huts of straw and palm leaves in regular streets, and there were signs that the place had been occupied for many years as a garrison.

Pepita Garcia, who, having been brought up like most Central Americans by an Indian wet-nurse, understood the Maya tongue pretty thoroughly, took occasion to try and ingratiate her guard by remarking on the appearance of the fortress.

"The white girl is right. It is a castle that was first found out by a woman the great Princess Tlahoma, and we have never left it empty since. From it we can pounce on the town of Chiapas when our time comes, like a condor on a carcass."

"But why should you hurt us, who never harmed you?" asked Pepita insinuatingly.

The Indian's eyes glowed.

"Had our fathers hurt yours that they came across the sea with thunder and fire to kill them? You are their child. All is fair in war."

"But if you could help my father and me to escape," whispered Pepita, "you might be very happy, for we should love you."

In her fears of what was coming she was willing to do anything to save herself from being carried into the midst of the Indians.

Her guardian shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall be happy as it is," he said. "If I ask the chief to give me you for a wife he will do it, but you cannot go from our people. You are pretty, and if you behave well I will ask for you. It is better than to be killed for the Mother of the Gods."

Pepita shuddered. She did not fancy either horn of the dilemma, and had got all she wanted in the way of information.

Quahotl soon afterward ordered out a party of men to take the prisoners and the treasure mules away to the city, still leaving a strong guard behind.

They filed away to the end of the plateau, to where a vast cave mouth opened, the whole mountain seeming to be honeycombed with these excavations, and very soon all disappeared in the bowels of the hills, while the sentries of the Lost City resumed their lonely watch for fresh victims of the race they had learned to hate so bitterly.

CHAPTER XVII.

OMINOUS SOUNDS.

THE sun had sunk to the bosom of the blue, distant Pacific when the last lancer in the party of Ramirez and El Rubio Bravo led his horse out of the narrow passage in the rocks down which fell the stream that rendered the ascent possible.

"There!" quoth the Don, as he stood on the table land and looked over toward the Mission, "the padre did not dream this, at least. So much is certain."

They were on a broad plateau, with a cavern-pierced wall of rock at one side, and a grand view on the other, very like the fortress of Iximaya on the other side the mountain, had they only known it.

Twenty men could have defended the passage against an army, and it would have taken a heavy bombardment of shells to have cleared the plateau of its defenses, in any event.

"Now let us find the padre's pool, with the tortoises," observed Ramirez. "For my part, I am no faster, and I love the taste of a stewed terrapin. Even frogs are not bad in their way, well cooked."

They led their horses on, as the old priest had directed, and found the plateau of rock, strewn with boulders fallen from the mountain above, and very rough for near two miles along.

When at last they turned the spur of the mountain he had mentioned, they came into a valley so deliciously green and beautiful that it charmed them all, and there in the midst was a most lovely little pond, about a hundred feet across, into which they saw hundreds of turtles of all sizes, scuttling from the banks in great alarm at the noise of the horsemen.

"There are the turtles, sure enough."

"Good place for a camp."

"Hurrah for roast terrapin."

The gastronomic enthusiasm of the party was evidently at fever heat, and it was not long before the horses were picketed and feeding on

the succulent green grass, while the men were wading into the pond which was, as they could see, less than waist deep, hauling up the turtles by main force to shore, where they were soon cut up and roasting over the fire.

"I don't wonder Padre Miguel felt as if he had committed a sin when he'd eaten a whole turtle," said Charley Brown, reflectively, as he threw some bones into the fire. "You see, when a man sets out to mortify his appetites, it's easy enough if he sticks to cold potatoes, porridge, and all that sort of thing. But roast turtle has a way of inducing a man to overeat himself, and I feel as if I couldn't get up and fight just now if the whole army of those Lost City brutes came ramping in here."

The others laughed at him, but Olaf said:

"It is by no means impossible they may come, and if they do, it is as well to be prepared for their reception."

"You are my chief of staff, Robaldo is my aid, Brown my surgeon-general," returned Don Jose, smiling. "Post your pickets as you please, señor, for I feel so much like the doctor here that I am going to sleep."

But the swordmaster, who was of a very temperate habit and whose caution was developed to a great extent in his character, was not content till he had examined every portion of the little valley and ascertained that it could only be entered from the front as they had come, when he arranged his camp for the defense.

He placed the men outside, next the entrance, with their saddles in a line, close to each other, lance and carbine resting on the saddles, ready to pour a volley into any intruder.

He had already, during his short service with Ramirez taught the men how to use the lance on foot as a pike with fearful effect, and felt that they were safe from every front attack.

Then he posted a mounted sentry on the plateau, with orders to fire and ride in if any enemy appeared, arranged for a relief of this man at each hour of the night, and finally sought his own couch to rest, after looking well to his pistols and rifle, both of the then new Colt's revolving pattern.

How long he had slept he knew not, but he was wakened by what sounded to him like the booming of a bass drum and distant strains of military music.

Disbelieving his senses, he sat up, rubbed his eyes and listened.

The men were snoring away in chorus, and all was deathly still in the valley but the regular "bum! bum! bum! bum!" of a military band still sounded in his ears.

He looked at Ramirez.

The Spanish Rubio was fast asleep, his handsome face as peaceful as a church.

Charley Brown was snoring away the remnants of the turtle, and no one but himself seemed to have heard anything.

Softly he rose up and listened.

The sound seemed to him to come from high overhead and he began to feel superstitious.

Presently he heard some whispering near by and saw the corporal of the guard with three men crouching over the embers of a fire, talking to each other.

He went up to them.

"Do you hear anything, boys?"

The corporal looked up with a pale face and his comrades seemed equally afraid.

"Si señor, son espíritus."

[Yes, sir, it is spirits.]

Their superstition was evidently aroused.

Olaf smiled contemptuously.

"Spirits! Nonsense, corporal!"

"Then what is it, señor?" asked the man eagerly, evidently hungry for something which would relieve his terrors.

"It is a drum from the Lost City," said Olaf decidedly, "and what is more it cannot be very far off."

"But it comes from above, señor."

Olaf pointed to a cloud that had settled on the mountains overhead and spread out far and wide.

"That reflects it down to us, corporal. Moreover, it will rain before morning."

"That is certain, señor, about the rain. But do you think that drum is really beaten by mortal hands?"

"Yes; and on the other side of this mountain not ten miles off in a straight line, though it may be a long way over or round the rocks to get there."

Corporal Martinez, pacified for the time, went to call the relief and soothe the outlying vedette's nerves while Olaf returned to his couch and fell asleep, listening to the monotonous "bum! bum!" of the distant drum till it soothed him into slumber.

The rays of daylight woke up all hands and they saddled up and rode away, after having nearly cleaned the tiny pond of all but its smallest turtles, following the level path round the spur of the range which the young priest had trodden in his rapt and prayerful meditation fifty years before.

The contrast between what must have been the bearing of Padre Miguel and their own trampling pride struck Olaf so strongly that he said to Ramirez:

"Rather a different man at the gates of the

Lost City to-day than fifty years ago, eh, general?"

Ramirez looked grave.

"I fear so, my friend. And we may not get off so cheaply either. He was unarmed, fasting and on foot, we mounted, armed and well-fed, but he had the good God with him to save him, while we are only soldiers of fortune, who trust to our own arms."

Olaf shrugged his shoulders.

"God helps those who help themselves. Padre Miguel had to run without seeing anything except the teocalli. I intend to see the whole city, ay, and walk in it, if I have to storm the teocalli to do it. Cortez stormed a teocalli in Mexico. We may do it again in the Lost City. I heard the drums beat there last night."

And he told Ramirez how he had been wakened up by the weird sound.

Don Jose was a well-read man in the history of his own country, and at once remarked:

"Either that was for a sacrifice or for war. From what you say it must have been a very large drum, probably the great war-drum of Quetzalcoatl, covered with snake-skin, and that is never beaten save on great occasions. Of course this is only supposing there is a Lost City, inhabited by the same Aztecs that were found by Cortez."

"Whatever it was, it was not very far off, for I heard it distinctly," said Olaf. "I should say it was not ten, perhaps not five miles off."

"It might be that, and still three days' journey round the mountain," answered the general. "We shall see more when we turn into the next valley."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE BRINK.

BUT the adventurers were not destined to behold anything fresh when they came to the next valley, nor the next to that, for a long time.

They passed on between steep mountains and those that sloped gradually, under sheer precipices and above them, along a track that might be followed by wild guanacos but was assuredly not a regular road of any sort.

They noticed, as they went along, scores of places where a dozen men could bar a passage, and where it would be wholly impossible to bring artillery to bear in any manner on the defenders.

"If the other side is as easily defended as this," observed Ramirez, "no wonder Tlahoma held her own. It is absolutely impregnable on this side, and I hope no one will offer to prevent our returning, or we shall be in a pretty bad predicament."

Olaf, too, began to feel not a little uneasy as he rode along, and now and then looked back at the long file of lancers winding round some sheer precipice, on a road ten feet wide, with a second precipice on the other side, a thousand feet deep.

It was absolutely certain that if the men of the Lost City kept any scouts out on that side of the mountain, the whole party of the whites was lost, no matter what the difference in arms between them and their adversaries.

But for all they could see, the mountain-side was utterly deserted, save for a few condors wheeling round it and the guanacos on the rocks above.

No sign of human habitation was anywhere visible.

So the day passed, afternoon came on and deepened into twilight, when they at last rode into a broad pass between the mountains, which Olaf recognized from the description as probably the place in which Padre Miguel, fifty years before, had seen the horrible procession bearing the human victim to sacrifice.

Here Olaf halted and spoke to Ramirez.

"General, the padre's story so far seems to be confirmed; but you will remember that he was surprised by a number of people coming in his rear, from this very pass. If so, there must be some rear passage here, and we need it, to cover our retreat."

"Very true, my friend. What do you suggest?" was the immediate reply of Ramirez.

"A reconnoisance from this point, while we can still retreat."

"Aha! my Norse friend, you have more caution than I, after all, if you are a master of the sword."

"It is because I am a master of the sword that I am cautious, general. Let the men stop here, while you and I go forward."

"With all my heart."

The two friends rode slowly up the path. They were armed to the teeth; for Olaf, to oblige Ramirez, had taken to himself a lance, the present of his friend, and carried it, besides his rifle and revolvers.

The pass was several miles long, and in places expanded into broad valleys, while in others it sunk to the dimensions of a canyon with perpendicular walls. No passages opened on either side, so they rode on, secure from having their retreat cut off.

At last Olaf stopped.

"What is the matter?" asked Ramirez.

"Listen," was the reply.

They listened in silence. The Dane's horse

flung up its head, and the rider checked him sharply, saying:

"Be still, fool."

"What do you hear?" asked Ramirez.

"I hear the sound of horses. At least I did, a moment since," was the reply.

"Do you hear it now?"

"No, it has ceased."

"Was it not imagination?"

"No. It was the neigh of a horse, deep and hollow, as if in a stable. My own horse heard it, and pricked his ears."

"But he did not answer it."

"No, because I checked him."

Ramirez looked a little dubious.

"Let us go on, colonel. I heard nothing, and I have sharp ears."

Where they were the pass was quite broad and heavily clothed with trees; but, a little beyond, it narrowed again to a canyon.

The Dane laid his hand on his companion's arm, and said earnestly:

"Will you grant me a favor? Let us ride slowly toward that canyon, keeping in the shade of the trees."

"Certainly, my friend."

They rode in under some trees, and Don Jose proceeded:

"Something seems to be on your mind. Tell me what it is. You, usually so reckless, seem to be growing timid."

"I am."

"And why?"

"Listen. Either Padre Miguel saw the Lost City or he dreamed it."

"Certainly."

"But, so far, he seems to have dreamed of nothing that did not actually occur. It is fifty years since he was here, yet we are able to recognize all the localities through which he passed from his description."

"Granted."

"And if he dreamed nothing else, he did not dream of the end of all. Secondly, we have an independent proof that the Lost City is not far off. We heard the war-drum last night reflected from the clouds which clung to the mountain-side."

"I see all that."

"And in that case we are in grave peril from an overpowering multitude of the most cruel and implacable savages, who have us in a position from which escape will be difficult."

"I don't see that, Don Olavo. We can go back the way we came; for we know there is no one behind us."

"Exactly. But if we enter that canyon, we shall not know it."

"Why?"

"Plain enough. It is clear that there, or beyond it, is a passage leading to the other side of the mountain. We dare not pass that passage without exploring it."

Ramirez looked thoughtful.

"You are right. To neglect that would be a military blunder. We will do it."

They rode forward now very cautiously, keeping the shadows of the trees upon them, and presently came to where the walls of the canyon began.

"Now we can see and be seen. Forward at a fast walk, and keep your lance ready," said Ramirez, briskly.

So they entered the canyon.

It turned off sharply to the left after some fifty yards, and ran on, straight as a dart, widening every moment, till it ended in what seemed a colossal picture-frame.

In the center of this frame they saw a bare gray mountain, with mists curling around its top and sides, evidently at the other flank of a deep valley which they could not see, for the floor of the canyon ended abruptly, cutting across the view like a knife.

But what they could see was a single tall palm tree, that must have grown on an eminence in the valley, nearly as high as the pass on which they stood. Only the upper half of this tree was visible.

Involuntarily both halted and listened.

"There!" cried the Dane suddenly. "Now do you believe?"

Ramirez bowed his head.

He also had heard the faint, distant, but unmistakable crow of a cock.

"We are near the Lost City," he said gravely; "but where is the other passage?"

Olaf pointed down the pass, not a hundred feet from them, where a slight projection of the wall could be seen.

"It must be behind that shoulder, general."

The general moved his horse forward.

"Let us explore it," he said.

They came up and rode round the little projection, when, to their wonder and alarm, they beheld, not only a branch canyon at right angles to their own, ending in a lofty natural tunnel, but saw in the midst of it a crowd of people coming toward them.

They instantly drew back; but the question remained: had they been seen?

They could not be certain; but of one thing they were convinced, that it was not safe to remain where they were.

Back they rode to the angle of the canyon, hid themselves behind it, and then Olaf dis-

mounted, stuck his lance into the sand, hurriedly tied his horse to it, and said with compressed lips:

"I will defend the pass till you bring back the men, general. My rifle and pistols are sufficient."

Ramirez frowned.

"For what do you take me? I am no runaway. If you are in danger, it is my place to share it. But I prefer the lance, after all."

The Dane shrugged his shoulders.

"Two men cannot hold this place. We must have help. One must go back."

"Neither need do it," returned Ramirez, a little sullenly. "To tell the truth, I ordered Robaldo to follow us at the interval of a mile. As soon as he hears shots, he will hurry up."

The Dane looked immensely relieved.

"You are a better soldier than I. Be it so. But at least get off your horse and try a little shooting with me."

"I have no objection to that," was the reply.

Just as the Mexican general joined Olaf, they saw several horsemen ride into the pass, with their backs to them.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ROUT.

"THEY have not seen us," whispered Don Jose to his companion.

Olaf nodded and they watched, crouching behind pillars of the black basalt of which the canyon was composed.

The new-comers were mounted on small, beautifully shaped horses, and sat in high peaked saddles of the old Spanish style, with heavy stirrups of metal.

"The same saddles Cortez used," muttered Ramirez. "They have copied everything like children. And their dress. See, it is the very same Bernal Diaz describes. The wooden casques, the armor of cotton and featherwork. What would not some of our antiquaries give to see them!"

The horsemen they saw carried long lances of cane, with bright copper points, and rode along at an easy amble toward the distant palm-tree.

Olaf found himself trembling with excitement. He was at last on the threshold of the Lost City, and its inhabitants were actually under his very eyes.

Presently out came more horsemen, then a few warriors on foot, and finally came a regular body of spearmen, in uniform dresses of padded white cotton, marching in unison, as if they had been well drilled.

"They have learned that too," whispered Don Jose. "Those fellows are no fools."

As he spoke he heard the clank of weapons in the valley behind him, with the distant neigh of horses.

"Go back," he whispered to Olaf. "It is Robaldo. He will ruin all."

The Dane, full of anxiety, ran back to the edge of the valley and waved his hands frantically to Robaldo to halt.

The Mexican obeyed, and Olaf came back, satisfied that his support was within a few hundred yards.

When he rejoined Ramirez the last of the spearmen were still coming out, and they heard the sound of singing, with the deep "bum! bum!" of a drum, from the valley of the palm tree.

The leading horsemen were already going down into it.

The spearmen were in a solid body, marching away down the pass, and they began to think the procession was over, when another group of horsemen came out, closely followed by a string of laden mules, conducted by Indians on foot.

Ramirez uttered a low ejaculation.

"Prisoners! I'm sure of it. Probably white people are coming. It is good for us to be here! Santa Maria! we may be able to make a rescue. Call up Robaldo."

Olaf stole away, mounted his horse, and rode off to summon Robaldo, who came up at a walk, his men nervous and excited.

It was indeed a strange position to be in.

They found Ramirez mounted and sitting on his horse in plain view, had any one in the Indian column turned round to look.

He had his lance ready for instant use, and his handsome face was very stern.

The Dane came up beside him and saw a sight he never forgot.

Two old white men, stripped, and bound wrist to wrist, but bedecked with long garlands of flowers, were led in the midst of a procession of Indians, who had the ends of other garlands in their hands, and were dancing and singing as they went.

The Dane understood nothing of the words of the song, but he guessed the truth.

The bound men were victims going to the altar; the song a hymn to the gods.

But the procession was not over yet.

Presently came another little gap; then a mule's head came out, and then—

Olaf uttered a deep Danish curse in his excitement at what he saw.

Carmelita Ximenes and Pepita Garcia, scantily clad in short tunics of featherwork, crowned with flowers and bedecked with garlands were being led along on foot by two old Indians in long black robes, riding on mules.

Their black hair was floating down behind them, their heads were bowed with shame as they walked; but he knew them in a moment.

So did Charley Brown, who was close behind them, and in a moment the hot-headed young Briton had whipped out his two long navy revolvers, and was crying out:

"Forward, for God's sake, and cut those red devils to pieces!"

It was difficult to say how the wild scene of confusion that followed originated.

The three Rubios, headed by Olaf, went off at a tearing gallop down the pass, with shouts of rage, Charley Brown firing off his revolvers; and in a moment the whole Indian escort, seized with a panic, let go their prisoners and fled down the pass, after the backs of the spearmen.

Then Olaf turned his horse, swept up to Carmelita and called to her:

"Up! up! There is no time to lose!"

The girl understood him in a moment, caught his hand, and, setting her foot on his in the stirrup, climbed upon the horse, while big Charley Brown took up Pepita behind him almost at the same moment.

The lancers were spearing and shooting the Indian fugitives with as much zest as had the Spaniards some centuries before, and the whole pass was full of noise and confusion, when Olaf shouted to Ramirez:

"We must get back. This will not last."

Ramirez nodded.

In fact, he saw the tops of a forest of spears at the end of the pass, and saw that his own men were beginning to come back, as if they were getting frightened.

They looked down the narrow passage whence the Indian army had come, and saw that it was empty, but still hesitated to enter it.

Suddenly came the loud blast of a trumpet high over their heads, and a great rock, weighing over a thousand pounds, fell from the top of the canon and crushed Captain Robaldo, horse and all, into a bloody mass.

Ramirez glanced up, and saw the top of the canon lined with plumed heads.

"Into the caverns. It is our only chance," he shouted, and rode away down the narrow canyon, still unexplored, which ended in the tall arch of a cavern.

Before they could gain this shelter, a regular shower of rocks came down, and three more of the lancers were crushed to death, while the Indian spearmen at the end of the pass raised a hideous yell and came rushing after them.

Then ensued a wild and strange running contest, in which the elements of darkness and uncertainty were added to the perils of armed enemies.

Compelled to proceed slowly, with only the knowledge that horsemen had been there before them, they rode on through winding caverns, not knowing at what moment they might come on some impassable abyss.

Luckily for them, the caverns of the hill were not totally dark, and occasionally took the form of narrow canyons, while the floor was uniformly smooth, and they could see that they were on a regularly used track of some sort.

But although their passage might have been easy enough when alone, it was by no means so when they were followed and harassed by an active and vindictive enemy.

The first panic over among the followers of the procession, the regular force of spearmen came running back, and made fierce and persistent attacks on the rear of the body of Mexican lancers.

In vain did the horsemen try to drive off their foes by volleys of carbine shots; these men did not seem to fear gunpowder.

Before they cleared the caverns they had lost more than half their numbers, and the two old men, Don Ramon and Don Carlos, had been recovered from their grasp and carried away.

When they at last rode out of the cave onto the great plateau which hung like an eagle's nest over the plains of Chiapas, it was in a wild, confused mob of horsemen, and to confront a steady, determined-looking body of men, who stood waiting to receive them.

No undisciplined Indians were these, but a body of spearmen, ranged in just such a phalanx as they had learned from their Spanish foes three centuries before.

The men of Iximaya, in their lonely retreat, had not changed in all those years.

Coming out as did the Mexican horsemen in confusion, their ammunition nigh spent, the sight of this new body of foes, and the cries of the men behind them, completed their demoralization.

They scattered and rode hither and thither in a mob, and the spearmen made a wild charge, butchering them almost without resistance.

Olaf, who had retained his pistols to the last, saw that all was over when Ramirez went down, struck by a stone from a sling, and he dashed away to the edge of the plateau, still carrying the girl behind him, shot down an Indian who tried to intercept him, and the next

moment was flying down the steep hill into the plain below, followed by showers of stones.

How he got to the bottom, or what was the next thing that happened, passed like a dream over his mind.

When he came to his full senses, he was riding at a slow amble over an open savanna, his horse white with foam; but he was safe from pursuit, and the arms of Carmelita were round him.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DEAD JAROCHE.

THE swordmaster was recalled to himself by a faint sigh from Carmelita, more like a sob; and he pulled up his horse abruptly. He saw that the girl's face was deadly pale, and a little stream of blood had trickled down from under her black hair, over her temple and into her neck.

"Did anything strike you?" he asked anxiously.

"A stone," she murmured. "I did not feel it at first; but now, how my head hurts!"

He looked back over the savanna and at the mountain-side.

No sign was to be seen of pursuers; but a single horseman was coming slowly out of the forest, half a mile off.

He took out his field-glass and uttered an exclamation of grief.

"It is poor Charley, and he is hit."

Carmelita clung to him and hid her face.

"Take me away. Let no one see me!" she murmured. "They took away my clothes, and only left me this."

But Olaf kept on looking.

"Pepita is with him."

Carmelita uttered a cry of joy.

"Pepita! Thank God! I am not alone!"

They watched the approaching horseman, and, as he came nearer, saw that it was indeed the young Englishman, drooping over his saddlebow, with Pepita behind him.

The girl seemed to be unhurt; for she was half supporting him and guiding the horse as it came on.

When they at last came up, it was evident that Brown had been wounded and was sick and dizzy. His head was bound up with a handkerchief, and his left arm was all dripping with blood, though it was tightly bandaged at the elbow.

Charley smiled faintly.

"We shall never see—the Lost City, old fellow," he muttered in English. "They've routed us—horse—foot and—dragoons."

"What hit your head?" asked Olaf.

"A stone—that's nothing—but my arm—one of the devils ran it through—missed my body—it'll be all right if—we can find a—house."

Olaf looked round in despair.

"There are no houses for miles. Not till we get to Chiapas. What shall we do?"

"Go into camp—next best thing—getting late—sundown soon. Trees and water—never mind grub."

The wounded man spoke faintly; but he evidently retained his senses.

Olaf took his horse by the bridle and led him on some distance, till they came to a grove of palms.

To their great joy a patch of bananas was near the palms, sure evidence of some effort at cultivation not long before.

They found a spring in the grove and made their little camp for the night, the girls, with instinctive modesty, keeping a long way off from the men, Olaf attending to his comrade.

Bananas were plentiful and ripe, and bananas are the main stay of the tropics; so that Charley was soon made quite comfortable and fell asleep.

Then Olaf went roaming round the grove to find the owner if possible, and was soon rewarded by coming on a small *jacal* or hut, covered with palm leaves.

But the *jacal* was deserted and silent, not a living creature within.

He struck a match to examine it and started back with a cry of horror.

In the middle of the floor lay a man's body, the throat freshly cut, while the absence of any offensive odor showed that the murder had been recent.

The sight impressed him so much that he ran out and did not dare to go back for some time, till he had mastered his nerves. Then he lighted a dry stick for a torch, went in, and examined the hut closely.

It was an ordinary *jacal*, without any furniture but a low table and a few stools, with a rude pottery lamp in a corner, full of oil, with a floating wick. This he lighted, and then took another look at the dead body.

It was that of an ordinary *jarocho* or peasant, dressed in a waist cloth as if at work when he was killed and otherwise naked.

On pegs in the wall hung his Sunday dress of velvet, jacket and *calzoneros* or loose trowsers, buttoned up the outside with silver buttons.

It was evident the man had not been robbed as well as murdered.

How he came by this end was a mystery; but one which Olaf did not try to solve. All that he thought of was that he had found a dress

for one of the girls, if she did not object to wearing male attire.

He took the poor fellow's Sunday clothes and went out into the grove, where he called:

"Carmelita! come here! I have found clothes."

He was answered by a timid voice.

"Go away then, and leave them where we can find them."

"Here they are, then," he said: and he hung them on a banana bush, and went back to his comrade.

Ten minutes later he was startled by a little Mexican boy, in clothes a size too large for him, who swaggered up to him in the moonlight, with a saucy air that made him laugh, as he recognized Pepita.

But the girl was not in a laughing humor, though she could not help that self-conscious hectoring air woman are apt to assume when they put on male attire.

"You must find something for Carmelita," she said, "and while you go I will take care of poor Carlos."

Much relieved to have got one girl out of an embarrassing scrape, and realizing that the two would keep together as long as Charley was asleep, the Dane set off on another pilgrimage to the hut, which revealed nothing more.

There was no other body there, though the poor Jarocho seemed to have had a wife; for there were traces of woman's attire in the little hut, in the shape of an Indian blanket.

After satisfying himself on this point he blew out the lamp and was going out when he heard the low murmur of voices somewhere near and stood still.

"If I go out," he thought, "they will see I have been inside. If I stay they may come to see who it is."

Very softly he crept under the table, which stood in a corner and waited. Presently came footsteps, and a man and woman entered the hut.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE JACAL.

THE man who entered was a dark-whiskered half-breed ruffian, in the dress of a common *peon*, but the woman evidently belonged to the same class as the dead *jarocho*; for she wore a silk petticoat, a handsome *rebozo* or shawl, and black satin slippers—on feet guiltless of stockings, but very pretty and well shaped.

She had a dark Gipsy face, with laughing black eyes and abundant hair.

She seemed afraid as she came in and said:

"For the love of Heaven, Maso, don't take them. There will be a curse on them. He wore them last."

"I'll take the risk of that, Juanna," retorted the half-breed, with a coarse laugh. "You didn't want to come in when you saw the candle lighted, for fear his spirit had done it; but if I didn't fear him alive, I don't dead."

As he spoke he gave the body a contemptuous kick, and the woman uttered a slight cry:

"Don't do that, Maso. Remember, he was my husband this morning."

Maso uttered a foul Mexican epithet.

"He was a coward. See how easily I killed him. Where are the clothes, Juanna?"

"They were there," she faltered, turning away her head and pointing.

He uttered another oath.

"They're not there. You good-for-nothing! if you have hidden them, I'll kill you, too."

The Dane listened and understood.

It was evident that the poor *jarocho* had been murdered by his wife's lover, but what had prevented the murderer from taking the clothes before was yet a mystery.

Juanna began to cry.

"Cruel Maso! when I have given up my soul for your sake, to quarrel over a few clothes! I saw them hanging there at the very moment you ran away, when the *vaqueros* came by. Very likely they came in and stole them."

Maso turned on her savagely.

"You lie, you she-devil! You've hidden them. Tell me where they are, or—"

A long knife gleamed in his hand as he spoke, and the woman started back to the door with a shriek.

In the same moment Olaf jumped up, and sent table, lamp and all flying at Maso's head, causing the peon to utter a yell of terror and dash out, knocking down his partner in guilt.

The swordmaster followed, and saw him running like a deer across the fields, while the woman dropped senseless by the door in her terror.

The Dane laughed scornfully as he looked at the flying half-breed.

"What a people are these Mexicans! He was not afraid of a ghost, forsooth! Then it was not fear made him run. Well, if this is what I find at the first step on Mexican soil, it must be a lively country. Here is a suit of clothes for Carmelita, if the woman was dead, but she is only in a faint. What shall I do?"

The woman began to stir, and he went into the hut. An idea had struck him.

She sat up confusedly and looked round, murmuring to herself:

"Ay de mi! I have lost my soul. What shall I do to escape hell? The *padre* told me that all murderers were burned forever."

Olaf spoke solemnly from the hut:

"Juanna!"

She started up with a shriek.

"It is his voice, his spirit. Oh, Jesu, save me!"

She sunk on her knees, praying fervently.

"Juanna!" he called again.

"Spare me, spare me," she wailed. "I will do penance all my life, if you will only not haunt me."

"Juanna," he repeated, "listen and obey."

"I will, I will," faltered the superstitious woman, trembling. "I will do anything."

"Take off those fine clothes that you wear, the wages of sin, and put on only your working clothes. Never again should you wear finery. Your life is to be given to prayer and penance."

"I will do it all," she sobbed, and Olaf heard her, somewhat to his dismay, tearing off her clothes.

Then she dashed into the hut into a corner, snatched up something, and he saw her come out into the moonlight in the simple blanket and loin-cloth of an Indian woman.

"Now go to Maso," pursued Olaf, "and if he kills you, it will serve you right. I will wait for you in the better land. Go."

The woman slunk away, wringing her hands and moaning, and as soon as she was out of sight Olaf came out, picked up her simple dress, and carried it away to the girls in triumph.

As he approached them he saw the slim figure of Carmelita slip away into the bushes, but the Mexican boy held his ground bravely, and graciously observed, as Olaf handed him the petticoat and *rebozo*:

"You were meant for a soldier, colonel; you are such a good forager."

A few minutes later the whole party was re-united, and Carmelita, looking as pretty as a picture in the graceful dress of the *jarocho*, crept to her lover's side and whispered to him:

"A thousand thanks! Now I feel a lady once more; not a creature."

Olaf smiled and wondered to himself how both girls would feel, if they knew the true history of their garments.

However, he left them to their blissful ignorance and went to the *jacal* once more, where he piled cornstalks and dry palm leaves over the body from the stores around the hut, pulled the frail tenement down into a heap on the dead man, and made everything ready to fire the pile in the morning. After that he went to sleep by his wounded friend, Charley.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GOMEZ BROTHERS.

THE city of Chiapas, like most Mexican towns of any great size, boasts a cathedral and a plaza. Of course a cathedral implies a bishop, and bishops are plentiful in Mexico, with quite a sprinkling of archbishops, and all the other paraphernalia of an orderly and well-regulated hierarchy.

The town of Chiapas is further celebrated for its chocolate, of which the ladies are so fond that they drink it in church, and poisoned the only bishop who ever dared protest against this secular anomaly in divine service.

At least that is the legend, which has given rise to a Mexican proverb about "Chiapas chocolate."

But Chiapas, for all its cathedral and chocolate and bishop, has a bad reputation for another thing, *pronunciamientos* and revolutions, which it gets up on the smallest occasion, without reference to the central authority at the city of Mexico.

Mexico, being a confederacy of States, like our own Union, has a central authority, but it is very seldom powerful enough to assert itself, and the different States of the confederacy have a fashion of getting up independent revolutions on their own responsibility.

The latest *pronunciamiento* at Chiapas had been issued by Don Baldassare Ortega, who held the whole State, and had very strong desires to be President of Mexico itself.

Don Baldassare had no trouble to raise an army, for Mexico is always full of soldiers of fortune. He was at almost as little trouble to maintain it, for Mexico is a rich country, and has stood the exactions of three centuries of robbers without collapsing.

Dom Baldassare's method of raising troops was to issue a *pronunciamiento* or proclamation calling all gallant gentlemen to his standard. After he got them there, he ordered forced loans from the towns, so much to each, and paid his troops with the proceeds.

And besides this, which was but enough to pay for horse-feed and cigars, it was well understood that the officers were allowed to have "onglas libres"—nails free.

Inside the town, forced loans, outside, the genial presence of the sociable bandit, who asks for purses with a bow, and kills the unwilling with a smile. Altogether pleasant State, Chiapas; a pleasant land that of Mexico, and a great contrast to the wilder Central American republics, where the people are too fond of fighting to have much left to steal.

Mexico being richer, the people are too fond of stealing to fight, except in a sort of half-hearted manner, as they did at Buena Vista and such battles.

The town of Chiapas, like most others in Mexico, has its walls and fortifications; and it was from the southern gate of these that a party of five gentlemen, on very handsome horses, rode out, the evening after the destruction of Ramirez and his little band by the men of the Lost City.

They were all gentlemen, in the Mexican sense; that is, they wore handsome purple *mangas* or mantles, instead of the ordinary *serape*, and each man had about a thousand dollars worth of silver buttons on his jacket and trowsers. They were all dressed very near alike, with broad white hats girt with silver cords an inch thick, with tassels half a foot long.

Under these broad white hats their swarthy faces and long black hair looked doubly dark, and their figures were set off by the black velvet jackets and *calzoneros*, both slashed with red or yellow silk, and loaded with silver buttons.

Each man had a voluminous silk sash of red or yellow, and a long straight saber swung at his side, though they did not seem to be provided with firearms.

They were all stalwart, handsome men, very well mounted; and the same extravagance of silver, in the form of studs, was shown in their saddles and on the head-pieces of their bridles.

It is hardly necessary to say that they all rode well; for in Mexico that is second nature to a people that have no roads to speak of, but spend half their time in the saddle.

As they rode out, one of the gate loungers said to another:

"It's easy to see where the Gomez brothers are going to-night."

"Hush," said his comrade; "they will hear you."

"Not they," retorted his friend—lowering his voice however—"the horses make too much clatter for us to be heard."

They watched the six horsemen till they were lost in the dust of the plain.

"Our Lady help any travelers who are coming into Chiapas from the south to-night," remarked the first lounging. "They will come in pretty light, if they come in at all."

His friend laughed.

"Serve them right. They should stay home."

From the conversation of these gentlemen it was clear that the Gomez brothers, while to all appearance rich *haciendados* were in reality professional brigands, and this was actually the case.

The fact that they could practice such a profession so openly speaks volumes for the state of society in the Mexican republic.

Meantime the six rode along at a canter, and the youngest brother at last observed:

"I am rather tired of this humdrum life, Jose Jesus. Here we have come out three nights running and never taken a purse."

"What would you have, Jose Maria?" the next man retorted. "One cannot have luck all the time, can they?"

"For my part," interposed the third, "I am of Jose Maria's opinion. I am tired of Chiapas, and propose we shall go out into Guatemala again. It's a long time since we've heard from brother Pepe and our cousin Bragamonte, and I want to see them."

"Hear Domingo talk!" laughed the fourth. "One would think he was afraid some disaster had happened to Pepe or Tolomeo."

"And so I am, Martino," answered Domingo, seriously. "We have never before been so long without news from either. I leave it to Pedrillo if he does not agree with me."

"I certainly do," replied Pedrillo. "Ask Gil what he thinks."

Gil Gomez was the oldest of the brothers, a grave, square-built man, rather shorter than the rest, but heavier than any. They were all strikingly alike in face and dressed their hair and beards exactly alike.

"I am of the opinion," he said, "that if we do not have some great stroke of luck to-night, we should take our mules in the morning and start for Guatemala to see our cousin Bragamonte, and find out what is the reason he or Pepe does not come or write."

"Agreed," cried Jose Maria, gayly. "And if we have luck to-night it will put us in spirits for our journey. I vote we go anyhow."

As he spoke they neared a clump of tall organ cactus, around the foot of which the broad leaves of the maguey made a shelter fit to conceal man and horse.

Beyond them spread on all sides a brown dusty plain, the grass withered, only the broad, fleshy leaves of the cactuses flourishing.

Here they dismounted, and Gil said:

"Let us wait till the moon rises. If nothing

comes to-night, nothing will come that is worth taking hereafter. Jose Ramirez has gone that way, and he leaves bare bones behind him."

They settled themselves to watch for prey like wild beasts that they were.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BANDITS.

THE clump of cactus in which the Gomez brothers lay was one characteristic of the republic of Mexico in the *tierra caliente*, or hot belt.

In sand and dryness such as prevails there only the cactus will grow, and without it the people would be badly off.

There are hundreds of varieties of cactus in Mexico, but the most universal and striking in appearance to a stranger are the organ cactus and maguey.

The organ cactus rises in spires like the pipes of an organ, and sometimes borders the roads for miles as hedges, interspersed with shorter spreading varieties.

The maguey has many virtues. In its center rises a shoot which flowers once in seven years, if allowed to.

But the people do not generally allow it to flower. Instead, they cut out the shoot and scoop a hollow, from which every day they get a painful of juice.

And this juice, fermented, under the name of *pulque*, is the national drink of all Mexico, the substitute for lager beer, which everybody drinks.

Out of the leaves of the maguey they make matting, cordage, paper, cover their houses with them; in fact, Mexico would be nothing without the maguey.

To the Gomez brothers it had the further merit, in conjunction with the organ cactus, of hiding their horses from view while they watched the open plain.

Presently the moon rose, very near the full, and they saw a couple of moving spots, far away on the plain.

"Travelers at last!" quoth Jose Jesus Gomez, with a tone of great joy. "Only two. Who'll go out and stop them. It's not worth while for us all to get up."

"One can never be too cautious," quoth Gil Gomez, sententiously. "Let three, at least, go. They may have guns."

It was finally arranged that Jose Jesus, Jose Maria and Domingo should go, and they mounted their horses and sallied out on the plain, riding leisurely toward the two dark specks approaching so slowly.

As they rode on, the moon got higher, and the light plainer.

The dark specks were about five miles off when they first saw them, and they resolved them, as they came closer, into two horsemen.

But when they got still closer, Jose Jesus suddenly cried out:

"They're riding double, Domingo, and one has a girl behind him."

This soon became plain as the strangers came closer still.

One of them had a woman riding behind him, the other a boy in Mexican dress.

"Lassoes, *bermanos*," said Domingo, as soon as they ascertained this fact.

The others understood him.

Hitherto they had been walking their horses slowly along, as had the strangers; but now they put them to speed and rode down on the travelers, taking the lassoes in their hands as they went.

There was no longer any disguise of their purpose, nor did they care to longer deceive the new-comers.

But just as they were almost within throwing distance came a couple of flashes from the strangers, who had halted in silence, and down went Domingo's horse, head over heels, all in a heap, his rider leaping off in a manner that showed his consummate horsemanship, while Jose Jesus uttered a yell:

"Jesu Maria! Carajo!"

In another moment he fell off his horse which stopped dead short, while Jose Maria wheeled and galloped away as hard as he could go.

The three bandits had caught more than they bargained for.

As for Domingo, now unhorsed by the death of his animal, he ran for his brother's horse, and would have seized it when another flash came from one of the travelers who called out warningly:

"Cuidado! Anda!" [Take care! Go away!]

The bullet went through Domingo's hat and grazed his head with such force as to drop him to the earth senseless, when the traveler who had fired observed in English:

"We've made one horse, Charley. Drop Pepita and let her go up to the beast. He might scare at our double loads."

The Mexican boy—nothing less than Pepita Garcia, jumped off from behind Charley Brown and cautiously approached the black horse that stood mutely by its dead master. She would

not have been a Spanish-American born and bred, had she not known how to ride like a man, and it was no trouble to her to climb into the saddle.

Once there she cried:

"He is a beauty, but the stirrups are too long, and I have no spurs."

Olaf dismounted, took the spurs from the body of the dead robber and put them on her feet, after which he shortened the stirrups for her and asked:

"Could you take care of yourself now if they followed you?"

"I could run at least," said the girl, "and what's more, I can throw a lasso too."

Olaf nodded.

"You'll do. The lasso is better than a sword if well handled."

He returned to Charley Brown who had his left arm in a sling, and said to him:

"We are not through our troubles yet."

"Why not?" asked Charley dolefully. "I swear I'm in no condition to do much more fighting to-night."

"You can shoot as well as ever, can't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's all I want you to do."

"Then load up my pistol for me. I can't do it, and I lost two charges."

Olaf took the long navy Colt, Charley's old favorite, and loaded it before he returned it.

In the mean time Pepita was caroling on her new horse in the vicinity, very much elated at their luck.

Suddenly she cried out:

"Take care. Here are four men coming at full speed, and the fifth is not dead. He is stirring again. Ah!"

She had been not far from the fallen figure of Domingo, and as she uttered the last shriek the brigand, who had been only shamming death, made a tiger-like leap from the ground and caught hold of one of her stirrups.

In a moment Charley Brown, forgetting all his weakness and pain, dashed after them as Pepita's horse ran away, and the next minute there was the bandit running like a deer by the horse, Pepita trying to beat him over the head with a lasso coil, and Doctor Charley closing up, cursing volubly in English, but not daring to fire for fear of hitting Pepita.

Olaf saw it; and saw the four remaining bandits coming from the clump of cactus, and in a moment realized that they were in a bad predicament that would be very difficult to get out of.

The presence of the girls was the element of embarrassment.

He knew that he could not catch them, doubly weighted as he was, and could only watch.

Presently he saw a flash, and back came Charley and Pepita full gallop, with four men hard after them, whirling their lassoes overhead.

"Only four left," he muttered. "Now for it."

The Englishman and the girl dashed by at full speed and Olaf began to fire at the pursuers, keeping his horse still.

He emptied his revolver, quickly, but with as good an aim as he could take in the dark, and had the satisfaction of seeing the four bandits swerve off and gallop away to the cactus clump from which they had emerged, while Brown and Pepita went on at the same wild speed to the city.

"He is right," muttered the Dane. "In love every man for his own girl. But I ought to have given that horse to Carmelita."

He rode on without further molestation to the gates of Chiapas, and entered at last the famous city of cathedrals and chocolate, where the first persons he saw were the Englishman and Pepita with a crowd of idlers round them, telling their story of assault in all probability.

As soon as Charley saw them enter he called out:

"Hello, Olaf, who do you suppose it was set on us outside?"

"How should I know, my friend," returned the Dane, a little testily. "You took care not to stop and inquire."

"What else could I do?" remonstrated the Englishman. "I had my girl to take care of and they were almost on us, with me not able to fight. But that's neither here nor there. What I want to say is this. Those fellows were the six Gomez brothers. That's all, old boy."

CHAPTER XXV.

CHIAPAS.

ONE great difference between Mexico and the Central American republics is that in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica they do their fighting for the most part fairly, while in Mexico assassination is the rule, battle the exception.

Even the decent members of society, so called—seem to feel no wonder when they hear of murders and highway robberies. They call it a "lucky escape" if a person gets off from such attempts with his life, but take no steps to stop the practice.

Their chief topic of consolation in Chiapas to the travelers was:

"The Gomez brothers are bad ones; but they won't come back into the town after this failure."

"I am rejoiced to hear it," answered Olaf, very politely. "There is, then, some limit to the impudence of robbers, even in Mexico."

The question then arose, being in Chiapas, how they should dispose of the girls and of themselves; for there were no hotels.

"The convent of Our Lady of Guadalupe will accommodate the señorita," suggested one bystander, "and you three señores can go to the bishop's house. He is always hospitable."

It was impossible to tell the crowd in the street that they were mistaken in the sex of Pepita, and not advisable either, so they rode off to the convent, where they rung at the bell, asked for the abbess, and left the two girls in safety, no questions being asked.

As they turned their horses' heads toward the plaza, Charley observed thoughtfully:

"I tell you what it is, old fellow, I was brought up the strictest kind of a Protestant with an idea that these monks and nuns were regular heathens; but by Jove, we couldn't have landed two girls in such a nice place in any Protestant country in the world."

"And now I suppose, we'd better claim the bishop's hospitality," replied his friend. "Then you'll be converted for good."

Charley laughed.

"No danger of that. But seriously, what shall we do. Have you got any money left?"

"Only what was on my horse, and my diamonds."

"The same with me."

"Did you lose much in the fight yonder?"

"A mule, a lot of clothes and about ten ounces of gold."

"Then we are not so badly off as when we entered Honduras."

"I should say not. What do you propose to do? Get married at once?"

"I would, but there is one difficulty about it."

"What is that?"

"No priest would marry us."

"Why not?"

"Carmelita is under age."

"What of that? Her father's dead and so is Pepita's father. We are their only living protectors."

"I know that; but—"

"But what? We must get married or else leave them. It's not proper to go on in this way. The girls would both lose all their characters."

"Yes, I know, but—"

"But what, Ole?"

"Well, it seems that they both have relatives in the city of Mexico."

"Whom they never saw."

"All the same, the abbess and the priests will insist on their joining them. You see, we are *ereticos*—heretics—and they would not let two Catholic girls marry us if they could help it."

Charley Brown pursed up his lips.

"I never thought of that. Confound their popish prejudices!"

"I thought you liked them just now," remarked Olaf, dryly.

Charley could not help smiling.

"It's confounded inconvenient. Then I suppose we shall have trouble to get them away from that convent."

"Assuredly. I never dreamed otherwise."

"And yet you let them go in there."

"Certainly."

"And why?"

"Because it was my duty."

The Dane's face was grave as he said this, and Charley stared.

"Why your duty? The girls were alone, under our protection."

"For a while, but that was only because it could not be helped. We saved their lives when they had lost all their natural protectors."

"I know that, but—"

"But as soon as we came near a town, it was our duty to put them in charge of those against whom no suspicion could exist."

"But suppose we never see them again?"

"We shall see them again."

"How do you know?"

"Because the sisters will not want to keep them. They took them in for charity, but my word on it, they will question them closely, and find out whence they came and who are their friends in Mexico."

"And will they send them there?"

"Of course they will. Even nuns cannot keep a free hotel for all comers, and these girls come of rich families. They will be sent on to Mexico, and their friends will 'come down' to the church without asking."

"And where shall we go to-night, Ole?"

"I think we might as well bivouac on the plaza with the beggars. I don't want to go to the bishop's palace, for they would put us into the pauper's cells. It's a fine night, and we can get all we want to eat in the morning."

They rode into the plaza, watered their horses at the public fountain, and then went to sleep

on the cathedral steps holding the bridles of the three horses, for they still retained the animals captured from the bandits who had attacked them.

Olaf looked at him, and when he saw how fat and in what fine order the animal was, he observed:

"I've half a mind to change horses for this brute. He looks well, and has a much finer caparison than mine."

"I'd do no such thing," said Brown dryly.

"Why not?"

"Because it seems to me you'd be running your head into needless danger."

"Why?" asked the Dane sharply.

"Easily told. At present the Gomez brothers don't know you, never saw you. If you are seen on that horse with the harness on, you will be recognized by them in broad daylight, and then good-by to you."

Olaf snapped his fingers.

"That for the Gomez crew. I have met them all now and I can beat them all. You say they never saw me. How about to-night?"

"That was a chance meeting in the dark. It would give them no clew to you."

"How are you sure they do not know me now?"

"How should they?"

"Bragamonte may have written."

"He was too much hurt."

"Possibly; at all events I never flinched from a fight yet and I shall not do it now."

"Then you will take that horse?"

"No; now I look at him closer he has not the loins of my own, but I'll put the saddle on, and let them come and take it if they dare. I'm sleepy. Good-night."

In another moment both men were resting on the cathedral steps, wrapped in oblivion.

CHAPTER XXV.

JOSE MARIA.

AT daybreak next morning our adventurers were up, and Olaf deliberately changed the equipments of the robber's horse to his own before sunrise, and then set out to find a place where they could buy forage for the animals and food for themselves.

In this there was no difficulty; for, while hotels are scarce in the outlying towns of Mexico, *posadas* and drinking shops are plentiful, while one can buy almost anything in the markets which are held in the plazas.

They fed their horses, broke their own fast and then the question arose: what next?

"Let us sell the horse," suggested Ole.

They went to the horse-market, but no one would buy the animal. It was too well known, and people feared the Gomez brothers too much.

At last up came a tall, dark man with bushy black whiskers and long hair.

"What do you want for that horse?" he asked.

Olaf looked at him narrowly. He bore so strong a resemblance to Pepe Gomez that the swordmaster answered:

"It depends on your name. What is it?"

The dark man eyed him in turn with a furtive, sullen air.

"My name is nothing to you," he said. "I will give you two onzas for the horse."

This was twice what the animal was worth in that land of horses.

"The animal is yours," answered Olaf. "He belonged to a dastardly thief called Gomez, whom I shot last night. If you know any of his relatives, tell them El Rubio Bravo has pined their brother Pepe, their cousin Bragamonte, and that he defies them and all their clan."

The dark man had turned very pale, with a blue tinge, as Olaf spoke; but he said not a word till he had paid his money and taken the horse.

Then he said in a low voice:

"You have me now; but if you dare to meet me in the plain, in one hour, with the sword, I will show you that you have not killed all our family yet."

"I will be there, senor," replied the Dane politely. "By the southern gate, between the gate and the cactus clump, where you hid last night."

The stranger bowed gravely.

"I shall expect you, senor. I am Jose Maria Gomez, at your service."

He got on the horse barebacked, and rode away across the plaza, the people staring at him but no one offering to stop him.

"A strange country," mused Olaf; "but the man is no coward."

He told Brown of the arrangement made, and the doctor announced his intention of going along to see fair play.

"I'm not good for much just now in a fight with fists, but I can shoot as well as ever," he observed, "and you don't know what sort of tricks these beggars will try on you."

They went to the convent to ask after the ladies; but were refused admittance in the most ungracious manner, and Olaf said:

"I knew it would be so. Luckily Carmelita has told me the name of her uncle in Mexico, and we can see her there. Pepita is sure to be with her."

This did not much comfort Charley, who was to use his own words—"consumed in love,"—but there was no help for it, so they rode away to the southern gate, and as soon as they got outside, Brown exclaimed:

"There they are! Look at the beggars! Four men on horseback and a fifth sitting on the ground by the cactus clump."

"They mean to try on the trick of which the people warned us in Tegucigalpa—four on one. The fifth must be the one you shot, Charley. Didn't you hit him badly?"

"No, confound him; the horses were going and he was going. I aimed for his body, but think I only grazed him. It was enough for me that he let go the stirrup. One thing, you potted one of them, and this fellow's horse."

"Then they wanted the horse we sold to put under the dead horse's saddle, and mount this fellow. He must be hurt or he wouldn't sit there the way he does."

They went on till they neared the clump of cactus, when Jose Maria Gomez came forward alone to meet them.

When he was within fifteen yards, Brown raised his pistol and cried out:

"You're near enough! halt!"

The Mexican pulled up and bowed.

"The cavalier sees I have only a sword. I can harm no one. I come only to demand the vengeance of a man on El Rubio Bravo, who boasts he has killed three members of my family. My brother, Jose Jesus Gomez, lies on the plain out yonder. One of you shot him. Which was it?"

"I had that honor," answered Olaf blandly, "and I will shoot you and your brothers too if you attempt any foul play."

Jose Maria bowed again.

"There is no need of boasting," he said. "You are in no danger of foul play. We did not know it was you last night, or we should not have assaulted you in the way we did. Our quarrel is a solemn one."

Indeed, there was a certain dignity in this dark outlaw's manner as he spoke, that almost compelled respect, and Olaf answered:

"Be it so. What would you?"

"To fight you on foot with the sword, to the death," replied Jose Maria, gravely.

"That is a thing I never did yet," said the Dane, as gravely. "I am satisfied as soon as blood is shed in a duel. Death is not a necessity of every affair."

Jose Maria shook his head, frowning,

"Our affairs are different. We fight to the death only, after one of our number is hurt, and here you have already killed one."

"That was not in a duel. In short, I will not fight a duel with you unless it is well understood that first blood ends the affair," returned the swordmaster.

Jose Maria shrugged his shoulders.

"Since you are afraid, I have done all I care to make this meeting honorable. Now look to yourself."

He wheeled his horse and galloped off to his brothers, who had been watching with the most eager interest.

He said something to them, and in a moment they pulled out from under the trappings of their horses four carbines, and fired a regular volley at the Dane and his friend.

But in a contest with fire-arms the two blondes were more than their match, and the next moment they were peppering the brigands with pistol-shots, and going at full gallop for the gate of the city.

Indeed, it was hardly prudent to stay there any longer.

The suddenness and confusion of the attack caused all the shots to miss, except one of Charley Brown's, which struck Jose Maria's horse in the shoulder, making a flesh-wound.

The bandits galloped after them, loading as they went, and chased them to the gate of the city, where Olaf turned and made a charge with his sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, his lance swinging at his back.

He fired five shots, missing every one, and cursing his luck and the lance swinging at his right arm.

Finally, full of rage, he caught up the lance and cast it like a spear, transfixing Jose Maria, and uttering a shout of triumph.

"One more of your Terrible Seven gone," cried the Dane, tauntingly, and just at that moment he heard shouts behind him.

The next moment, out of the gate, led by Charley Brown, came a party of young Mexican gentlemen, in all their bravery of velveteen and silver buttons, flourishing their long *machetes*, or broadswords, and yelling valorously:

"Muerta a los guerrilleros! Muerta a Gomez!" [Death to the robbers! Death to Gomez!]

Six men had terrorized the town; but now that the citizens saw two men fight them, the cowardly Mexicans took heart and came on, twenty to one, to finish the battle.

As for the Gomez brothers, they did not wait to be overwhelmed; but, firing a parting volley

in revenge, they turned and fled, and Chiapas was at peace for a time, as El Rubio Bravo rode in at the gate.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MEXICO.

THERE is no city on the continent of North America that has so many elements of beauty as Mexico the magnificent.

Situated on a grand table-land, with just enough elevation above the sea to make the climate delightful all the year round, it is surrounded by the grandest mountains to be seen near any city in the world.

Popocatepetl and Iztacilwatl raise their snow-crowned summits to the skies, forty miles away, and between them lies the pass of Otumba, whence Cortez and Scott advanced to their victories.

The city boasts of broad streets, generous plazas, the Alameda—a grand park with rides and drives called *kaseos* in all directions—and crowds of picturesque costumes in every street and on all the corners.

Rancheros and *jarochos* from the country around, in their dashing velveteen and silver, prance about on their blooded horses, and bow to the ladies driving on the *paseo*, in the cool of the evening.

The great cathedral, with its flat roof, looks down over the plaza and its crowds, and the bells are clanging for a festival.

On the *paseo*, among the horsemen, two men were especially noticeable as being Rubios, in that land of swart men. They wore the Mexican dress and rode fine horses with silver-studded harness, but they did not look like Mexicans, and there was a difference in the way they sat their animals.

Mexicans always ride with a straight leg, by the balance alone, but these men had shortened their stirrups to a position more like that used in Europe, with knees slightly bent.

They rode well enough, however, to show that there are more styles of equitation than one, and more than a dozen of the fair occupants of the carriages cast admiring glances at them; for a Rubio is generally a favorite with Mexican ladies.

The two friends, however, did not seem inclined to respond to the advances of the ladies, and one of them said to the other in English:

"It's no use, colonel. You were so sure we should find them here, but I don't see anything that looks like them."

"Don't be impatient, my friend," retorted the Dane lightly. "I have not lived among these people for nothing. We shall see them here."

They rode slowly along scrutinizing all the carriages, for they were of course searching for the ladies of their respective affections who—as they knew—had been sent to the city of Mexico from the convent of Chiapas.

The *paseo* on which they were riding ran out past the Alameda toward the castle of Chepul-tepec about three miles off, but as they went on they noticed that all the water-carts had stopped and turned round about without any apparent reason.

The road was as good as ever further on, but the carriages and horsemen kept in the track of the water-carts and like them turned round and came back.

Not a horseman or vehicle ventured beyond this intangible boundary till our two friends rode up there and passed outside.

Their conduct excited immediate remark, and a moment later they heard a voice calling:

"Senores, senores, un momento!" [Gentlemen! Gentlemen, a moment!]

Charley turned his head to look.

"What's the matter, I wonder? By Jove, it's one of those good-for-nothing Greasers after us."

Good-for-nothing or not, he was a very nice, gray bearded old gentleman, well dressed and on a fine horse, and he doffed his hat with the true Spanish grace as he came up, saying:

"I crave a thousand pardons of the honorable gentlemen, but I take the privilege of age and our common Christianity to excuse the liberty of addressing you without previous acquaintance."

Olaf's hat was off before the other had finished speaking, and he answered sweetly:

"Senor, you have no need of any excuse to those who can see in your benevolent face the sure index of a Christian gentleman's disposition. What may be your honorable pleasure?"

Charley Brown, who began by this time to understand Spanish pretty well, grumbled to himself in his native British:

"Too blooming polite by half. I hate these Greasers."

But the old gentleman had come on a friendly errand, for he went on:

"I presume from your riding on here, that you are strangers in this city."

"We arrived here this morning," answered Olaf promptly. "What about this road, senor?"

"Simply that if you ride a quarter of a mile further on, now that it is getting dark, you will be robbed and murdered. That is all. It is

only safe to go to Chepultepec in the morning, when the robbers have gone home."

Olaf bowed low and answered:

"We are very grateful for your warning, but my friend and I are armed and used to taking care of ourselves. For all that we are exceedingly thankful to you, senor. May I offer my card and request the pleasure of knowing your honorable name?"

The old Mexican took the card with a bow.

"The cavalier will excuse my inability to read his card in this light. I am Don Lerdo de Ximenes, and my residence is at No. 357 Calle de San Francisco, where I shall be happy to place my house at the disposition of such noble Americans as yourselves."

Olaf started slightly as the other announced himself and then replied:

"Then you are the cousin of my old friend Don Carlos de Ximenes of Havana and you will know me better when I say I am Don Olavo Svenson, commonly known as—"

"El Rubio Bravo!" exclaimed Don Lerdo in a tone of delight. "Is it possible? My niece Dona Carmelita, who arrived three days ago, has told me what a favorite you were of my cousin Carlos, and I am very much charmed to see you. You will come to see us to-morrow?"

He looked nervously down the road as he spoke, for the evening was drawing on, and the carriages and horses were growing less and less frequent, even on the frequented part of the paseo.

"You must excuse me if I leave you," he went on, hurriedly, "but I am a family man, not a king of the sword, like you, Don Olavo. You will call to-morrow? *Buenos noches.*"

He galloped away as hard as he could go, and Olaf perceived in the dusk of the road, toward Chapultepec, several horsemen coming down toward them, the cause of Don Lerdo's too evident terror.

"There are the gentlemen of the road, Charley," he said, carelessly. "Are you for a little adventure to-night? For my part, I am tired of doing nothing but eating and riding. I thought this Mexico was full of fights, but they seem to have nothing but night work."

Charley yawned.

"Those fellows down the road are not worth an adventure; there are too many to make it profitable. See, there are one, three, seven, ten, fifteen to be counted, and Heaven knows how many hiding in the bushes. They'll have to rob each other to-night, for I don't care to run the gauntlet of that crowd without a better excuse."

He turned his horse back as he spoke, but Olaf looked longingly down the road.

"I'd like one little dash," he muttered. "I have a kind of impression that I should meet the last of the Gomez brothers there, and I want to close my accounts with them."

Charley Brown shrugged his shoulders.

"You seem to have a great love for running your head into danger. What is there to gain down there? Thieves don't carry much in the way of plunder, and you don't want to turn robber on your own account."

"All the same," returned Olaf, obstinately, "I have made up my mind to take a ride to Chepultepec to-night, let who will come on the road. I never let pickpockets scare me in American or English cities. I am fond of seeing all that is to be seen, and I want to find what sort of people are these gentlemen of the Mexican road. Will you come with me, or shall I go alone, my friend?"

Charley growled:

"You're a fool, and I'm another. Come on. We'll try it, anyway."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE RIDE.

BOTH men were well armed in the modern American fashion; that is to say each had a pair of revolvers.

Behind them the paseo was rapidly emptying as the last rays of twilight reddened the top of Popocatepetle; before them stretched the broad and beautifully level paseo to the foot of the hill of Chepultepec, for several miles, bordered with trees, and clothed with occasional horsemen coming lazily on.

Our two friends loosened their pistols in the holsters and cantered gently on, the best point of the Mexican horses they rode.

In about five minutes they came to the first horseman, a dashing cavalier in velvet and silver, who looked like any other Mexican gentleman and saluted them with a polite "*Buenos noches, senores.*"

"Not much like a robber," was the comment of Charley Brown. "Perhaps he's only coming home from the castle."

As they swept past him Olaf took a sly glance over his shoulder, and saw that the cavalier was also looking back, and had slackened his pace to a walk.

"He's a robber sure enough," said the Dane; "but it seems to me I saw him only this morning on the plaza smoking a cigarette."

"Shouldn't wonder. These Greasers are all alike," commented Brown.

The people they met were two in number of the same dashing appearance, and Olaf said to his companion:

"Draw your pistol, but keep it down by your leg."

They rode on, and the new-comers opened to either side of the road and halted.

"Good-evening, cavaliers," cried one. "You seem in a hurry."

His tone was jeering, but Olaf did not notice it as he swept past.

Neither offered to pursue the Rubios, but as the Dane looked back he saw that the first man was coming to join the other two.

"I see their plan," was his only comment.

Ahead of them were three more men on horseback, and these halted in the road as they came.

"Take out your other revolver and be ready to charge," quoth Olaf, coolly. "I know these fellows to a dot. They're used to having fools give in like lambs."

They rode on a little faster, and as they came up, one of the three men shouted:

"Stop! You're on the wrong road!"

Olaf laughed and galloped on, raising his pistol so as to be seen, while Charley, who had recovered from his wound—for it was six weeks since they left Chiapas—followed his example.

Crack! crack!

The three Mexicans wheeled their horses and fled. They were evidently not used to being the passive parties in an affair of this kind.

As they went, one of them uttered a cry of pain, and they noticed him reeling on his horse.

A little further on were about a dozen more in groups of two or three at a time strung along the road, and the first three galloped up to them, when they all clustered together, prepared to dispute the passage, about a quarter of a mile further on.

"They're too strong for us," observed the Englishman. "We'd better turn back."

"Not from Mexicans," replied the Dane in a tone of determination. "I'm going to give these fellows a lesson and show them that two good men can ride to Chepultepec in spite of them."

On they went now at a stretching gallop and as they came near the bandits began to fire pistols at them with an uncertain aim, for the bullets whistled wide.

"Just what I thought," quoth Olaf coolly. "Firearms are not natural to these people. The knife is their national weapon. Don't fire till you are sure."

In a few moments more they were close on the Mexicans, who showed signs of wavering, all but one man.

He rode out in front and fired a pistol with such good aim that Charley Brown ducked his head to avoid the bullet.

Then the two began firing and the whole crowd of bandits fled, crying:

"*Los diablos Yanguis!*"

[The Yankee devils!]

All but the man who had so near shot Brown.

He flashed out a sword and rode at Olaf, who wore his own battle-blade, Mexican fashion, and in a moment more the two swords were clashing in a regular duel, the swordmaster laughing and taunting his opponent as he parried his savage cuts.

"Not quite enough, my friend. Very well meant, but that was a false cut. Try again. Why you have good notions! Aha! Did you think you had me then? Take that!"

He made a rapid slash at the other's face, but to his surprise it was parried and the bandit cut back with such skill and force that it almost reached his sword-arm.

"Halt! one moment!" cried the Dane, as he wheeled his horse out of distance. "You are too good a swordsman to be a thief. Who are you? I don't want to kill you. I am a professional, you an amateur."

The strange horseman uttered a cry of amazement:

"I know that voice. Are you not El Rubio Bravo?"

"The same, senor."

The stranger threw down his sword.

"And we were fighting together," he cried. "Ah, my friend, do you not know me? In my fallen fortunes I am still your friend, Jose Ramirez."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GENERAL BANDIT.

FOR several seconds Olaf was too much amazed to do more than repeat:

"Jose Ramirez! Here!"

"Yes, my friend," said the ex-general, "Jose Ramirez, here. Once a general at the head of a gallant troop, now fallen to seeking purses on the road, but always your friend."

He turned in his saddle, and shouted out:

"It is a friend. It is all a mistake. Come up again."

"No closer, if you please, my friend," said Olaf, abruptly. "I have had enough of your comrades, for the present. Tell me how you

came here, before I know if you are fit to be the friend of an honorable soldier."

Ramirez laughed.

"You thought I was dead."

"Of course I did. I saw you struck down in the battle. Had I been alone, I should have tried to rescue you; but I had a lady in charge, and—"

"That is all right, my Norse friend. I do not blame you one bit. It is true I went down. One of those confounded Indians hit me with a stone and I was stunned; but I came to myself while the confusion was still wild, found myself alone in a heap of dead with my horse standing by me and saw the men of that confounded Lost City—which I wish we'd never gone near—busily cutting out the hearts of the last of my poor devils. Not wishing to have that cheerful operation performed on myself, I made a spring to my horse and galloped away with a whole posse after me, down the mountain into the plain, and, by Jove! they followed me half-way to Tabasco, where I finally arrived more dead than alive."

"Then that was the reason they did not chase us," said Olaf, thoughtfully. "I have often wondered how they came to let us escape."

"Oh, they are liable to make mistakes as well as any one else," answered Ramirez, lightly. "I tell you I had quite a little time of it, and still worse when I got to Tabasco."

"Why?"

"Why! simply because I was too well-known there. The Ortega party had been beaten, and I was one of Ortega's principal followers. To make a long story short, they clapped me into prison there and I only escaped ten days ago."

"How did you escape?"

"A woman, of course. There always is a woman in the case. The jailer's wife, a pretty, kind-hearted creature, took pity on the Rubio, and thanks to a jealous husband who used to beat her, and a few looks of languishment on my part, she let me out one night and insisted on running away without me. What could a man do? I took the gifts of Heaven, got back my horse and arms, left the lady at one of her friends, and made for Mexico, the only place short of the United States where I am not well known by sight."

"And what made you adopt this life?"

"This life? It is only a change of names. We gentlemen of the road make war just as our soldiers of fortune did—*onglas libres*—nails free. It is a fine life, my friend. You would do well to join us. My friend Ortega is sure to succeed and I have here the nucleus of a very pretty little band to join him as soon as he has taken Tabasco. You can have any situation under the new government you wish."

"Thanks," was the dry reply. "I have seen all I wish to see of this delightful country. As soon as I have done some business which I intend to do to-morrow, I shall take the first steamer for New Orleans."

Ramirez sighed as if he felt grieved.

He looked around up and down the road, where the bandits, to the number of twenty, were clustered as if hesitating.

"I am so sorry," he observed. "We could make such a find troop of these fellows, and Ortega is certain to succeed."

The Dane smiled a little scornfully.

"These fellows! You know well enough that they are not worth half their number of your old men. They let us two drive them like sheep."

"That is true," replied Ramirez, in a tone of confidential regret, "but what is a man to do? All they need is teaching, and you and I together might make our fortunes with them, Olavo. I have a scheme to take them all into the city some evening and make a sweep of the Bank of Mexico. It could be done easy enough with the right men, and we could put Ortega in funds at once to raise a hundred thousand men. Just think of what might be done with a hundred thousand men."

"Yes, if the bank were in our hands; but in the mean time, my friend, from being a general and a cavalier, you have become what the world calls a common robber."

"And what would you have?" asked Ramirez, with some bitterness. "In our unhappy land the robber is the only gentleman who lives at his ease and is feared and respected. I have tried to make war like a gentleman, but it is no use. The men would not follow me without liberty to plunder. Now I am chief of this little band simply because I am the boldest man and the best shot among them. You think I am only a common robber now. I will show you that I can walk into Mexico on the plaza before all the world and no one dare touch me."

"Oh, come, my friend, you are joking. True you hold this road; but the police must know you, and in the city—"

Ramirez laid his hand on the Dane's knee.

"I tell you what I will do," he said. "I will wager you two gold onzas [forty dollars] that I can meet you on the plaza at noon under the shadow of the cathedral, and have all my men in plain view armed and mounted as they now are, and that not a single officer or man dare molest us."

Olaf looked incredulous.

"I will not make the bet. True, your present mode of life is one I hate; but you have been my friend and I do not want to see you taken. Don't try it."

"On the contrary, Colonel Don Olavo," answered Ramirez sharply, "I will show you that I hold as much respect as any man in Mexico and that if you hated—as you call it—my present mode of life you hate what is the profession of half the gentlemen of Mexico."

"Well, well, let us turn the conversation," was the good-humored reply. "Your notions are not the same as mine. Have you any objection to my going to Chepultepec and returning to show people it can be done?"

"None whatever," was the cordial answer, "and how prospers your love affair, my friend?"

Olaf told him as they rode along to the grim castle on the heights of Chepultepec, and the ex-general observed:

"All the more reason we should go to the city to-morrow to see you. You do not know our people yet, Olavo. That old fox Ximenes will cheat you out of your eyes. He will never let you see your Carmelita again if he can help it, because you are a heretic. But leave it to me, I know how to manage these fellows. Meet me on the plaza at ten to-morrow morning and we will pay a call to Don Lerdo de Ximenes. You shall have your Carmelita and our friend Carlos his Pepita or my name is not Jose Ramirez."

Then they rode on again and finally parted like old friends, when the Dane and his British comrade returned to the city.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DON LERDO'S LETTER.

DON LERDO DE XIMENES sat in a hammock on one of the balconies of his *patio*, and he looked worried and anxious though he was trying to calm his nerves by the infallible and consoling recipe of a Mexican husk cigarette.

Father Geromino had just left him, after giving him a long lecture, and the Don did not know what to do.

He was naturally a good-natured man, but he was dreadfully afraid of his father confessor, and the latter had just told him it was his duty at any hazard to keep his wards from seeing any heretics, more especially since they were admittedly in love with two of the accursed tribe.

Don Lerdo was a rich, easy-going old gentleman, who owned a coffee hacienda on the road to Vera Cruz, and had but one object in life—to be allowed to live in peace and quietness as they do in other countries not so given to revolutions.

He had seen the Americans enter Mexico in Santa Anna's time, and was one of those not few Mexicans who regretted ever after that the country had not then been annexed by "Los Yanquis."

"For when they were here," soliloquized Don Lerdo, "one could ride to Chepultepec and anywhere else in safety, and ever since it has been a carnival of robbers."

Which was all very true, and a good many other people in Mexico think it, if they dare not all say it.

"And what in the world am I to do with these two girls?" went on Don Lerdo mournfully. "My cousin Carlos and his friend Garcia are both dead and these girls would be dead too had not these heretics saved them. And now they are both bent on marrying the Rubios, and father Geromino says that if I consent to it I shall run the risk of ten or twelve thousand years of purgatory. I wish they had carried them off when they had them, and not given them in charge of the abbess at Chiapas. It was, of course, strictly honorable, but it is exceedingly inconvenient to me to have to decide a question of this sort. And then, too, no one will marry them here, for they have no dowry. What fools my cousin and Don Ramon were to put their money into gold and get killed."

The good Don gave a jump here and dropped his cigarette.

A thundering knock had just come at the outer door of the house and it echoed through the *patio* like an answer to his thoughts.

Houses in the city of Mexico are all built round an inner court called the *patio*, for it is against the law to have windows overlooking a neighbor, and one must have air and light somehow.

Don Lerdo's *patio* was surrounded by tall colonades with several stories of balcony having polished brass railings. The front on the street had windows and balconies, and the old gentleman hurried to one of these to see who was at the door.

He beheld a hopped horse standing and lashing away the flies with his tail, while a Mexican gentleman with a purple *manga* draped over his velvet and silver, stood at the door. The hopples of the horse were little silver chains round the fetlocks of his fore-legs in the usual fashion.

"Thank goodness it is not the heretics," muttered the old gentleman and then he saw the door open, heard a few words with his servant, saw the gentleman give a note to the man and then turn away, unhobble his horse, mount and ride off.

Don Lerdo returned to the patio and his cigarette, when he was approached by his majordomo, who handed him the letter.

The old Mexican took it, and as he read his face grew as pale as ashes, so pale that the man noticed it and asked:

"Is the señor ill? Shall I fetch anything?"

"No, no, Tonio, it is nothing. Go and get my horse ready at once. I am called away on business."

The man departed, mystified, and Don Lerdo with shaking fingers reopened the note he had crushed, and read in it the cause of his sudden exhibition of fear.

It was written in a bold hand, and ran in the following fashion:

"To the Señor Don Lerdo de Ximenes.

"My VERY DEAR SIR:—A friend of mine, Don Olavo de Sovensone, lately saved the life and honor of one of your relatives, Donna Carmelita de Ximenes, who loves him, and whom he wishes to marry. I learn from other sources that you are unwilling to permit this match to take place, because Don Olavo does not belong to the ranks of the faithful. You will do well, señor, to remember that, in these times, no man's property is safe from the ravages of war, and that the patriots of our party hold all the roads between here and Vera Cruz, on which lies your own hacienda. Don Olavo is a friend of mine, and I will answer for his good standing in the faith we both have the honor to profess. He is now lodging at the Posada de San Trinidad, and you will do well to call on him at once, and give your legal and full consent to his marriage with the lady who has become your ward by Mexican law. If you fail to do this, you will receive no more returns from your estates this year, where the coffee crop is just growing ripe, but you will have instead a visit from

"Your humble servant

"At the disposition of your worship,

"JOSE RAMIREZ,

"General of Cavalry, in the service of the Chiapas Republic."

Don Lerdo nearly cried when he read this letter, and groaned to himself:

"Yes, what he says is true. The coffee is nearly ripe and they could sweep it in a single night. Father Geromino is a good man, but I must take care of my own while I have it. Purgatory is a bad thing, but poverty is worse while one is alive. These patriots are all the same, and they say this Ramirez is a devil as bad as the guerrilla Cortina."

He was hunting about for his spurs and hat while he was talking, and when he had found them sent up word that he "wished to see the señoritas at once, at once!"

Presently down came Carmelita and Pepita, with eyes red with crying.

They had both been lectured by Father Geromino on the enormity of wishing to marry "ereticos" but were evidently quite unconvinced of sin though they knew that they could not get married without the consent of this their nearest relative and guardian.

Don Lerdo amazed and confounded them with the brusque salutation:

"How soon think you can you get ready to be married, both of you, to those Rubios?"

Carmelita turned crimson and Pepita blue at the question.

Carmelita faltered:

"Cousin, are you crazy?"

Pepita giggled nervously and made no answer at all.

Don Lerdo stamped his foot testily.

"You fools, as long as I said no, you were at me all the time, begging and praying. Now I say yes, you are dumb. How soon can you get ready, I ask? In an hour?"

"In an hour! The idea!"

Both were indignant in a moment. The fact was that Don Lerdo was an old bachelor and did not understand women.

"Very well, then; when? To-morrow?—next day?—next week? I have changed my mind, and Father Geromino can go to the devil. After all, I am master in my own house."

The girls had recovered their color, and it was with a faint smile mantling her lips that Carmelita asked:

"Are you in earnest? Do you give your free consent to our marriage?"

"Yes, yes, I tell you. When can you get ready? Tell me quickly."

Carmelita threw her arms round him and hugged him coaxingly.

"And can we have all we need for dressing?"

"Yes, yes, anything."

The old bachelor had vague ideas on the subject, or he would not have been so liberal.

Carmelita pursed up her lips as if in a fit of deep consideration ere she said:

"Very well, then, I think that—if—we hurry very much—we can be ready in—one week from to-morrow."

The old man nodded absently.

"It is a bargain. Go and get ready as soon as you can. I am about to call on your lovers. They are, I find, honorable cavaliers and excellent Catholics."

He left the *patio* and they saw him mount his

horse and ride off down the street toward the plaza. Carmelita turned to Pepita:

"Do you know I can hardly believe it? I wonder what has changed him so suddenly."

They would not have wondered so much had they heard the tone in which this rich and respectable Mexican was addressed by a man whom he knew to be a robber, in broad daylight and in the plaza of Mexico city.

Don Jose Ramirez, his purple *manga* thrown gracefully over one shoulder, stood chatting with two other Rubios as the old man approached, and the Mexican heard him say as he came up:

"There is our man. You see, in this country it is necessary to be on the right side of the soldier of fortune, no matter what you call him at other times."

He took Don Lerdo aside, and asked in a low, menacing tone:

"Well, have you consented, or do you want visit from our people?"

"I consent most heartily. Which are the two honorable cavaliers?" answered the old Mexican, nervously.

"I will introduce you," was the polite reply, and the brigand turned to his two friends with the assurance of a man of the world introducing them formally.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

A STIFF norther was blowing over the waves of the Gulf of Mexico, and blowing the yellow fever out of Vera Cruz.

It was the first norther of the season and turned the town from an oven into an ice-house. But as we said before, it drove out the yellow fever and therefore was welcome, though it killed all those who were already sick.

Out in the bay off the mole lay a steamer pitching at her anchor, and on the deck was a trio of men talking to each other and eying the land.

"You cannot go back, Ramirez, in this norther. You'd better come with us," said Olaf Svenson, kindly. "No boat could live in that sea and the steamer won't wait till it's over. It will last three days, and till it's over you are a prisoner."

Ramirez looked back longingly.

"I don't like to go," he muttered. "Everything is ripe for a change and I shall miss my chance. Ortega has offered me the chief command of all his cavalry, and he is bound to succeed."

"Or be shot," observed Charley Brown in a dry tone. "You forget that."

"Well, shot or victorious it will all be over," said Ramirez, with a half sigh. "I do not like to leave him in his peril."

"You'll have to this time," said Olaf. "See, they are getting up the anchor now."

In fact the funnel of the steamer was sending forth clouds of black smoke and the sailors were winding up the windlass.

The wind was increasing every moment, and it was clearly impossible for any boat to reach the shore, for the waves were dashing showers of spray over the top of the mole.

Ramirez had come on board to see his friends and their brides off to the United States, and while they were drinking parting healths in the cabin, the vessel began to pitch and they felt a cold gust come down the cabin hatchway.

When they went down below half an hour before, it had been suffocatingly hot without a cloud in the heaven.

They came up to find a dark cloud full of hail and snow, bearing down on them with a furious wind before it, and when the cloud passed the thermometer had sunk from ninety-eight to forty with a gale blowing thirty miles an hour.

Such, are the pleasant contrasts of Mexican climate in the autumn and winter, and such the conditions under which Don Jose Ramirez, patriot general and brigand chief, was carried off to the United States whether he would or no.

The three Rubios arrived in New Orleans together and there separated to their future lives, whither we can only follow them for a little space to tell what became of them.

Doctor Charley Brown having put his savings of Honduras into diamonds and gold, had quite a snug little sum on which to found a practice for himself. He settled in the city of New Orleans and earned a great reputation in the treatment of yellow fever on which he wrote a book in years long after.

His wife, the pretty and coquettish Pepita of old, was as devoted as Spanish-American wives generally are, which is saying a good deal, and ceased to flirt from the day in which she was married.

Jose Ramirez also remained in the United States, where he served in the civil war and found what a difference there is between fighting in Mexico and in countries where Anglo-Saxons are the combatants. He had his fill of it, lost a leg, and finally retired into the tobacco and cotton business in Texas, where he still loves to tell stories of his old guerrilla days.

His friend Ortega, always on the point of succeeding, nevertheless failed, just about the

time Ramirez landed in New Orleans. In consequence, he was shot, which was the main reason why Jose never went back to Mexico.

Don Lerdo, mild and inoffensive, managed to please both sides during the subsequent troubles in Mexico, and kept his coffee estates under Maximilian, Juarez, Lerdo de Tejada and Diaz in succession, earning the title of "the Weathercock," by his facility in changing his politics.

The Gomez brothers, failing in killing the Danish swordmaster, ended in losing their valuable lives one after the other in duels with espadachins.

The "Terrible Seven," once broken by the Dane, ceased to excite terror and ended by being exterminated.

As for Olaf Svenson, he went to the city of San Francisco, where he made a great name as a professor of the noble art of swordsmanship, and had the satisfaction of establishing a school of fencers who could beat the best French pupils that came that way.

He still lives and is still an enthusiast on the subject of the sword, holding the idea that no exercise can be compared with that of fencing, in that it makes weak men strong, timid men brave, sick men well, and all men gentlemen.

When asked how his theory works among the Spanish-Americans, who are all fond of the sword and yet low in the scale of civilization, he answers proudly:

"What you call civilization is not all you think. It covers much cowardice, selfishness and dishonesty. The only sin of the Spanish-Americans is that they have not kept their race pure. Where you meet a pure Goth of the old race, a Rubio Espanol, you meet a gentleman of the type of Cortez and Alvarado; but in the lapse of centuries these men have contaminated their race by mixing with the Indians, and the result is the degraded *mestizo*, or half-blood, with the vices of all races, and the virtues of none. The pure bloods of the tropics are few in number, and the others have the power. Yet I will say that in all my travels I have never met grander men—polite, brave, generous—than I have seen in the mountains of the Spanish-American countries. The race is dying out, but another is coming to take its place. The Yankee nation will, in time, absorb all the continent. When it does, you will find that of lands in the world none is more favored than that bright clime which saw the valor of Cortez, Pizarro, Alvarado and all the brave, indomitable conquistadores who carved an empire with their swords, that will always be grand and wonderful."

THE END.

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